RITUALIZATION OF THE SELF AND OTHER: PURIM AS A COPING MECHANISM

CASSI BETH KAIL

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinical Program
New York, New York

February 1, 2011
Advisor: Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With deep gratitude I would like to thank everyone who made this thesis possible. First, I extend my warmest appreciation to Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman, whose scholarship and thoughtful approach to liturgy continually inspires me. Thank you for helping me to focus my research, and for challenging me in both my scholarship and my writing. I am also grateful to Dr. Wendy Zierler, Dr. Sharon Koren, and Dr. Alyssa Gray, who patiently offered me resources as my research began.

I want to acknowledge everyone who offered me continual support and encouragement as I struggled to balance the grueling demands of thesis writing and pregnancy: Erev Rabbi Kim Herzog-Cohen, Erev Cantor Mary Rebecca Thomas, Erev Rabbi Mara Young, Rabbi Jonathan Malamy, Rabbi Rachael Bregman, Hayley Feldman-Hills, and my incredibly supportive family.

I am deeply indebted to Rabbi Yossi Kulek and my childhood rabbi and mentor, Valerie Lieber, who helped me to realize the potential of meaning inherent in the holiday of Purim. I am particularly grateful for Rabbi Lieber's continued inspiration, advice, and mentorship, which encouraged me to become a rabbi in the first place.

To the love of my life and my best friend, Joshua Kail, thank you for the tireless hours you spent listen to me relay my research, and for the many nights you came home from a full day of writing to edit and re-edit my work. I am eternally thankful for your unending willingness to support me in all that I do.

Finally, to my unborn child, I would like to thank you for already filling my life with blessing, and for waiting to make your debut until the completion of this project.

INTRODUCTION

My earliest Purim experiences took place as a child in Temple Beth Ahavath Shalom of Brooklyn. My friends and I greeted each other by showing off our costumes: princesses, superheroes, and animals. Excitement filled the room, as we prepared for the purimshpiel, the rabbi's corny jokes, sounding the groggers during the Megillah reading, and munching on hamentaschen after services. They were wonderful evenings.

I did not give much thought to the meaning of Purim back then. Each year I heard the words of the Megillah. I knew its woeful tale of an arch-enemy who wished to destroy the Jewish People, and how Jews named Esther and Mordecai were able to play crucial roles in overturning Haman's evil plot. The Jewish People were saved, yet again, reminding us all of the popular refrain: "They tried to kill us, we won, let's eat!" Although familiar, as a Brooklyn-born 20th-century Jew, I was blessed in the sense that this story did not ring true for me; I had not faced anti-Semitism in a way that threatened my safety and security. I imagined that I never would. *Megillat Esther* was just *a* story—not *my* story. For me, Purim was little more than an opportunity to dress up, play games and enjoy the company of my friends.

It was not until years later, as a college student, that I began to see Purim in a new light. A local Chabad rabbi invited me to celebrate Purim at the Chabad House. I was preparing to leave, after a long evening of Megillah reading, dancing, drinking and socializing, when he called out to me. "There is someone I want you to meet before you go." Beside him was an elderly man, Joseph. I quickly learned that Joseph was a Holocaust survivor and to him Purim especially resonated. He shared a brief version of the story of his childhood, hiding from Nazis and eventually being separated from much

of his family. He could never forgive the Nazis for what they did to his loved ones. He explained that unlike Haman, Hitler was at least partially successful in his mission. Although he could not understand why, he was grateful to be alive. For Joseph, Purim was an opportunity to remember the face of pure evil, and celebrate in its eventual failure. I was taken aback; perhaps Purim had more meaning to it than witty costumes, shpiels, and partying, after all. At the time, however, I was not sure what that meaning was.

Purim became a deeply challenging holiday for me. I was struck by the powerful emotions it conjured up in the survivor I met. I felt deeply uncomfortable by his anger and rage, however well deserved. From then on, I understood the sounding of the groggers during the Megillah as a release of unbridled anger for enemies of the Hebrews—and later—the Jews. When I then learned the end of *Megillat Esther*—during which Haman and his sons are hanged—I felt that much more uncomfortable. Did it make sense to fight anger with anger? Should we celebrate in the pain and suffering of others—even if those others are our enemies who sought our destruction? Clearly the survivors of the holocaust had every right to feel that anger, but did I? Was their story my own? Could I ever participate in Purim the way that it was meant to be celebrated? Should I?

As I entered Hebrew Union College, and served small congregations in the Pennsylvania area, my questions began to evolve into how to approach Purim as a Rabbi and congregational leader. Should I deemphasize the less comfortable aspects of this day, in favor of its more enjoyable aspects such as dressing up, creating purimshpiels and

Purim carnivals? Did I, as a religious leader, have a responsibility to find contemporary meaning within—even if this meant emphasizing Purim as a release of angry tension?

Around the time I began considering Purim as a topic for my thesis, I sat down with my childhood rabbi, Valerie Lieber. She explained that Purim had never been especially meaningful to her until a few years ago. Just like any other Purim, congregants came in costume, baked Purim treats, and prepared a short shpiel. When it was time for the Megillah reading, the tone of the evening rapidly changed, as Gerald, a Holocaust survivor began to read. As the words of the Megillah left his lips, his eyes welled up with tears, recalling the painful memories of the atrocities from his own childhood. It was apparent that for Gerald this was no ordinary story. It was *his* story—and the tale of any and every Jew who survived after Hitler and the Nazis threatened our People's extinction. For the first time, Rabbi Lieber explained, the words of the Megillah came alive for her. She, like other congregants, deeply empathized with Gerald's pain, anger and gratitude in experiences that all too easily paralleled those of Esther.

It made sense to me that costumes and good fun had always been emphasized over the anger and violence inherent in our scroll. We could all relate to the joyous elements of the holiday—so long as we didn't think too deeply about why we were celebrating. Once exposed to Gerald's heartfelt reading of the Megillah, and Joseph's story on Purim, I realized that there was more, and was no longer satisfied with the way in which most liberal congregations approach Purim.

This thesis is my attempt to better understand the intentions of the holiday, and how its customs have evolved into coping mechanisms for the more vulnerable moments in our history. I place particular emphasis on the Holocaust because it is the most

gripping example of Anti-Semitism in recent memory for liberal Jews. I will use these findings as inspiration to challenge the ways in which we, as liberal Jews, approach Purim today, and to explore potential meaningful contemporary applications. This process will require historical, ritual, and ethical analysis and reflection.

This thesis is organized in three parts. The first will discuss Purim rituals: the Megillah reading, shpiels, *mishlo'ach manot* and *tzedakah*, pranks, carnivals, and humor. Beginning with the textual origins of these customs, I will briefly describe their evolution before applying each of them to Holocaust-related coping mechanisms.

The Megillah reading is the strictest component of the Purim celebration, with set rules around when we read the text, and the imperative that Jews hear every single word within. As the central ritual for Purim, various customs have developed in its close proximity, such as blotting out Haman's name, interpreting the Megillah text, speeches relating the text to modern day events, and even adaptations of the Megillah itself.

Once without rules, the Purimshpiel has become a staple of every Purim celebration, complete with its own rituals. I will explore its origins, and the surrounding customs of congregational participation, costumes, and other requirements. In particular, I will focus on shpiels created around the time of, and in relationship to the Holocaust.

As is the case with many Jewish holidays, food plays a central role on Purim. The Mishnah and Talmud mandate *mishlo'ach manot* and *tzedakah*. Over time, rules have evolved, ritualizing these customs as well. I will explore the implications of these rituals and the meanings and intentions behind them.

Finally, I will move of to the most open-ended component of Purim celebration: pranks and carnival humor. Beginning from the evolution of pranks, and acceptance of

otherwise intolerable behavior, I will explore the evolution and reason for masks and costumes, and poking fun at those in positions of respect. I will pay special attention to the Carnival in the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center just months after liberation from Nazi Germany; and modern carnivals among the Hasidim of Brooklyn, who continue to define themselves against the events of the Holocaust.

The second section of this thesis will focus on Amalekization of the other, as it appears in *Megillat Esther*, early Jewish history, and evolving Purim customs. I will consider violence inspired by Purim—on behalf of Nazis as well as the Jewish People, in an argument put forth by Elliot Horowitz in his controversial *Reckless Rites*. I will consider some modern manifestations of Amalekization, as well as the reasoning for "othering" our enemies. This will force us to wrestle with the inherent particularistic nature of Purim.

In my conclusion, I will consider the ways in which Purim customs proved meaningful for Holocaust survivors. Recognizing that their needs are not the same as those of liberal American Jews today, I will offer constructive and meaningful ways to present Purim within contemporary liberal congregations.

Purim is a complex holiday, offering us the opportunity to grapple with Jewish history, our People's resilience, and a beautiful train of rituals that have evolved tremendously since the Middle Ages. For all too long, most congregations have failed to take advantage of the rich array of possibilities Purim has to offer. It is my hope that this thesis will encourage readers to consider Purim in a new light, offering the potential for another mode of meaningful religious connection both to God, and the Jewish People as a whole.

SECTION 1: PURIM AND ITS CUSTOMS

The congregation of my childhood had two decades of women rabbis before I became a bat mitzvah. Unlike members of most congregations in the 1990s, my Hebrew school classmates and I had never been exposed to male rabbis. One day, a little boy went up to the rabbi asking, "Rabbi, can boys become rabbis too?" Without access to the larger context of contemporary Judaism, this boy assumed that it was traditional for women—rather than men—to become rabbis.

When it comes to Purim, most Jews are in the position of my classmates and me when we were children – we form our opinions on the basis of what we know, even though what we know may be a tiny skewed picture of reality. Unable to conceive of Purim without groggers, hamentaschen, costumes, and purimshpiels, we may make the assumption that these customs go back to Purim's origins and that they are the only innately Jewish experiences of the holiday.

In actuality, these assumptions are incorrect. Even the very origin of Purim is uncertain. No known text documents this holiday until the 2nd century BCE text of 2 Maccabees 15:36:

> "And they all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—which is called Adar in the Syrian language—the day before Mordecai's day."[1]

A lack of information of Purim's origins, coupled with numerous inconsistencies between the contents of *Megillat Esther* and what we know to be historically accurate, has led scholars to call Purim's beginning into question in recent years. Heinrich Graetz claims

[1] Translation taken from Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha, Revised Standard Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).

that the story was mostly an invention. He bases this argument on the fact that not only do 5th-century Persian records cease to mention any of the people within *Megillat Esther*,[2] but the text's contents also do not correspond to the Persian history at that time. According to Graetz, *Megillat Esther* was likely written during the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus in order to comfort Jews with the message that despite their suffering, God did not abandon them.[3] Alternatively, Julius Lewy puts forth the theory that the Megillah is a transformation of Pagan myths concerning the Babylonian gods Marduk and Ishtar, pointing out that Mordecai and Esther were not traditionally Jewish names. The story originally represents the feeling of the Mardukians, represented by Mordecai, and the worshippers of Ishtar, represented by Esther, towards worshippers of Persian gods, represented by Haman.[4] The story is also an attempt to show how the Babylonian Ishtar (Esther) eclipsed and supplanted the Elamite goddess Mashti (Vashti).[5] Additionally, there are various differences between *Megillat Esther*'s depiction of the story and the one that appears in the Septuagint.[6] Some scholars go so far as to say not only that *Megillat Esther* is not Jewish in origin, but that it is also not Jewish in character since in stark contrast to other sacred Jewish texts, the Megillah does not mention God even once; it reflects a secular understanding of the way in which miracles occur.[7]

---

[2] It is important to note, however, that most Persian records were destroyed during the wars around this time, so the lack of records is not conclusive.

[3] Solomon Grayzel, "The Origin of Purim," in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 4-5.

[4] In the Greek version of the story, Haman is not a Agagite but a Bagaite (worshipper of the Persian God Mirtha. See Jeffrey Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas," *AJS Review* 17:2 (1992), 248.

[5] There are various problems with Lewy's theory in that they do not explain the Jewish customs of Purim. Additionally, the Babylonian temple in Susa was dedicated to Ishtar rather than Marduk, so there was no reason for the Babylonians to be called Mardukians. See Theodore Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (New York: Sutton Press, 1950), 10-11.

[6] The Septuagint calls Purim Fruria and does not mention lots even once.

[7] Grayzel, "The Origin of Purim," 3-4; these theories are far from exhaustive. While it is not my intention to list every theory on Purim's origin and evolution, it is worthwhile to mention James Frazier, who believes that Purim comes from the Babylonian Sakaia and Zamuk festivals and the Roman Saturnalia, all

Challenging the veracity of *Megillat Esther* may not complicate a liberal Jew's understanding of Purim on a surface level, since many liberal Jews read sacred texts metaphorically rather than literally. Even if *Megillat Esther* is reminiscent of bad blood between Persians and Babylonians, or was an invention to meet the needs of Jews during the Maccabean revolt, they might argue, it is a Jewish representation of events, and a story to which every Jew can relate. This is certainly true, though we should not take Purim's foundation lightly. Questioning is origins has vast repercussions, challenging our preconceptions about from where our "traditional" notions of Purim stem.

As late as the 4th-century CE, Megillah 7a describes men of the Great Assembly who refused to institute the holiday of Purim. Perhaps they were privy to some knowledge that we are not: that not only *Megillat Esther*, but also Purim is an adaptation of customs and holidays from the surrounding cultures in which Jews lived.

Theodore Gaster points out seven themes that play out in our modern Purim celebrations, each of which has similarities to New Year holiday rituals in other cultures:

(1) Selecting a queen, and celebrating her accession

There was a common practice of starting the year by appointing kings and queens and celebrating their nuptials. Since the New Year is a time of change and opportunity for the community, royalty must represent this transformation through an annual renewal. New royalty symbolizes the new opportunities in the year ahead.

---

of which are "scapegoat rituals" that inverted social ranks, included merrymaking, revelry and other Purim qualities. They occurred in primitive agricultural societies, in which societies appointed a king to impersonate and put to death the god of fertility, hoping he would arise stronger than before. See Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas," 248-9.

(2) Parading an ordinary citizen in the garb of the king

In the Book of Esther, King Ahasuerus reward's Mordecai's loyalty by having Haman parade him around the city square in royal attire.[8] This parade personifies the tradition of temporarily appointing ordinary citizens as kings to rule between the end of one year, and the beginning of the next (demonstrating the topsy-turvy nature of this time of year). It was customary in Persia to lead a thin-bearded man on horseback in a ceremony called "The Ride of the Thin-Beard," escorted by the king's servants, with great honor. It took place just before the spring festival.

(3) Observing a fast.

Much like the fast of Esther, many cultures had a custom of fasting and abstinence before the New Year or a new season. The Babylonians observed such a period for 7 or 16 days. A few other examples include the Jewish Day of Atonement, and the Romans introducing their spring festival of Ceres with a fast.

(4) Executing a malefactor.

Executing Haman parallels the custom of killing a scapegoat at the beginning of the year "in order to drive out all blight and noxiousness." This took place at the Athenian festival of Thargelion when human scapegoats were expelled, and at a similar festival in Abdera. "Often… the unfortunate wretch is definitely identified with Death, Disease, or the like, which is thereby expelled from the community; and sometimes, too, the rite is performed in purely symbolic form, the 'devil' being hounded out of the city or village by men on

[8] *Megillat Esther* 6:11

horseback or by elaborate ceremonies of fumigation, as in Cambodia and among Eskimos in Alaska, when an evil spirit is hunted and driven out."[9]

(5) Armed combat between two parties.

Purim represents the combat between Jews and their enemies. In other cultures, the New Year or seasonal festivals include mock conflicts between two adversaries (summer vs. winter; life vs. death; rain vs. drought, etc). Over time, "these combats tend to take on a quasi-historical significance and to be explained as commemorations of historical encounters."[10] For example, this custom presents itself in Egypt between rival factions in Buto, and between Hittites to re-enact a border clash with their neighbors, the Maronians.

(6) Distributing gifts.

Similair to *mishlo'ach manot*, the gifts Jews offer one another on Purim, Romans distributed gifts on January 1 (called *strenae*), and the French *jour d'etennes*—New Year's Day—is derived from this custom. It is possible that "Purim" comes from the Old Persian word *purti*, meaning "portion." This custom may originally have stemmed from "the last lingering survival of the belief that, at the beginning of a new year, members of a community must share their food or goods in order to re-cement bonds of kinship."[11] In addition, during the Persian holiday *Farwadigan*, there was an All Souls' festival, which included fasting, and distributing gifts.

---

[9] Theodore Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (New York: Sutton Press, 1950), 15.
[10] Ibid. 15-16
[11] Ibid. 16-17

(7) Celebration around the time of the vernal equinox.

Purim falls within a week of the vernal equinox. In ancient calendars, this was viewed as the start of the year. Even in modern Arabic, New Years Day is called *phur*. Purim may therefore be an adaptation of the Persian New Year festival, which was held during the vernal equinox, and which contains many of the characteristics mentioned above. Gaster believes that the Jews of Persia adapted this holiday for their own purposes. "They fell back upon a popular story which seemed to incorporate all the leading elements of the festival and proceeded to use it (with judicious alterations) as the explanation and justification of the festival's existence," he argues. "It is in precisely the same way…that Easter and Yuletide became Christian festivals; and it is this process also which turned a primitive agricultural rite into the Israelite feast of Passover."[12]

With the origins of Purim unknown, its progression is also a mystery. Nonetheless, we do know that this holiday developed gradually, facing resistance from Rabbis even during Talmudic times. In the 2nd-century, Rabbi Meir followed strict rules already enforced regarding the reading of the scroll[13] and Megillah 3a-3b require priests to leave their sacrificial duties in order to listen to the reading of the scroll. But reading the Megillah was hardly universal. In Megillah 7a-7b, Rabbi Samuel ben Judah puts forth the argument that the Megillah will lead nations to believe that the Hebrews celebrate their downfall, "inciting the ill will of the nations." He argues that *Megillat Esther* was not composed under God's inspiration.[14] PT Megillah 1:5 explicitly includes the voices

[12] Ibid., 18.
[13] Tosefta Megillah II 5
[14] Ultimately, the text concludes that R. Samuel must have known the text to be divinely inspired. This is not surprising considering how important of a holiday Purim becomes, with the Megillah as its central text.

of sages who did not wish to celebrate Purim. God opened their eyes, convincing them that the Torah teaches they should observe this holiday.

Eventually, of course, Purim grew in importance. Laws developed around it, obligating all Jews to listen to the words of the Megillah at night as well as during the day,[15] to eat a festive Purim meal,[16] to drink,[17] to send *mishlo'ach manot*,[18] and give *tzedakah*.[19] This is indicative of a more serious appreciation for the holiday.

By the 11th century, R. Hananel ben Hushiel taught that all festivals will cease in the Messianic age, except for Purim, which is the only holiday that will continue to be observed. This understanding derives from *Megillat Esther* 9:28, which says that "the memory of Purim will never cease from among their descendants."[20] The dramatic shift from being suspicious of Purim's origins towards accepting it as the only holiday that will be observed forever – even in Messianic times – can be attributed to a number of factors. As Jeffrey Rubenstein argues, Purim is a holiday that exists "on the margins of this world," a time "when the normal structure breaks down, when everything is its opposite," not unlike the Messianic age. "Utopian thought, in general, pictures a liberation from constraint and structure, from power and rank, and foresees a time of harmony, equality, bliss…. Purim…is uniquely appropriate for such a world."[21] It may disturb us that the one holiday thought to survive beyond radical evil would be one reminding us of Amalek, hardship and suffering. Arthur Waskow notes that "*especially then*, when people will think that evil has disappeared, we must remember to keep

---

[15] Megillah 4a. *Mishnah Berura* 692:9 further insists that One may not talk during the reading of the Megillah; if he were to miss a single word, he does not fulfill his obligation.
[16] Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Aruch* 695:1-2
[17] Ibid., 695:2.
[18] Ibid., 695:4.
[19] Ibid., 694:3, 694:1.
[20] See *Midrash Mishlei* 9
[21] Jeffrey Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas," *AJS Review* 17:2 (1992), 277.

blotting out the memory of Amalek."[22] Unlike the miracles God performed on other holidays, Purim is a time when Jews achieved their own miraculous victory without divine intervention. This, Rubenstein argues, "can never be superseded by miracles brought about by God."[23]

Throughout history, Jews were persecuted in a myriad of different ways. Finding great meaning in their survival, communities as well as individual families began to celebrate their individuals Purims, commemorating days when the family or community escaped danger.[24] As 21st-century Jews, it may be more difficult for us to relate to the events of the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and other dark events in our People's history. Unfortunately, we have a modern example to which we may more easily relate: the Holocaust.

Much like the individual Purims of the past, victims of the Holocaust saw profound meaning in this holiday of struggle, suffering, and ultimate triumph. This paper primarily focuses on two communities, whose adaptation of Purim was deeply influenced by their experiences during the war.

The first of these communities is Landsberg's Displaced Person's Center. After World War II, the surviving remnant of European Jewry lived in temporary communities in displaced persons centers in Germany, Italy and elsewhere. They housed men, women, and children of a variety of backgrounds who had been uprooted during the war. The majority lived within the United States occupied zone of Germany. The American army helped them with emergency aid while they lived in the camps, and tried to facilitate a return to their pre-war homes. Repatriation helped a far greater percentage of the non-

---

[22] Arthur Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, (Massachusetts: Bantam Books, 1982), 126.
[23] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 276.
[24] See Philip Goodman, *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 14-37.

Jewish population, either because Jews would not go back to their homes alongside neighbors who collaborated with Nazis, or because their neighborhoods proved unwilling to let Jews return. As a result, Jews filled the overcrowded displaced persons centers. The Joint Distribution Committee, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and other supporters organized cultural, social, educational and religious activities, geared towards the needs of this vast Jewish population. There were elections and newspapers, schools, workshops, sports clubs, theatrical groups, orchestras and kibbutzim.[25] This type of environment was ripe with emotions, and possibilities for Purim traditions.

Landsberg was particularly special, as the city in which Hitler wrote *Mein Kafph* from prison in 1924. During the war, it became a German army camp site, with a nearby concentration camp. Now, after the war, the city itself remained hostile to Jews. Surrounded with a large guarded gate designed to keep Germans out, the Wehrmach barracks itself housed anywhere from 4,000 to 7,500 Jewish Displaced Persons.[26] By Purim of 1946, the Jews in this community wished to express their gratitude for being alive, as well as their frustration for not being able to leave Germany. Purim, which spoke to them as a "festival in which victory over an enemy is traditionally celebrated with revelry, even abandon, was perfectly suited to this time and place." For these reasons, "Of the many 1946 Purim celebrations of [the displaced persons camps] the one at the Landsberg Jewish Center provides a particularly vivid example of the energy and

[25] Toby Blum-Dobkin, "The Landsberg Carnival: Purim in a Displaced Persons Center," in *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979), 52.
[26] Ibid., 53.

creativity of people who nine months before had been near death."[27] They read the Megillah, had school performances, organizational banquets, literary parodies and a carnival. The carnival idea was originated at a meeting between Dr. Leo Srole, the UNRRA Welfare Director, and Boris Blum, a concentration camp survivor who was director of the Food Department in Landsberg through the UNRRA. "Things were very bleak," said Srole. "The British were hounding the ships to Palestine. It was winter, a terrible winter, and the mood in the camp was very low." Blum suggested that they have a Purim carnival, though he had never before seen one. "I saw in my imagination a Jewish carnival for the defeat of Hitler," Blum said. "I imagined masks, and carriages, and costumed people, the hanging of Hitler instead of Haman, and so forth. Also decorating the houses; the best house would win a prize…I myself didn't imagine that the [actual] carnival would take such a form…It surpassed my imagination."[28]

The Bobover Hasidic community also found noteworthy inspiration in Purim. The sect originated in the Polish city Bobwa one hundred and fifty years ago. The Bobover Rebbe, Shloyme Halberstam, was a Holocaust survivor, as were many members of the Bobover community.[29] They eventually settled in Borough Park, Brooklyn, where they currently have a thriving community of well over 1,200 families.

The Bobovers understood that Purim has been in transition from its very inception, adapting to the historical circumstances of the day. This insight paved the way for Hasidim to approach the holiday in a way that spoke to them, and strengthened their

---

[27] Ibid., 52.
[28] Ibid., 53.
[29] Shifra Epstein, "Going Far Away in Order to Better Understand the Familiar: Odyssey of a Jewish Folklorist into the Bobover Hasidic Community," *Journal of American Folklore* 112:444 (1999), 203; Shifra Epstein, "Drama on a Table: The Bobover *Hasidim Piremshpiyl*," in *Judaism Viewed From Within and From Without*, edited by Harvey E. Goldberg (New York: State University of New York, 1983), 196.

ideologies.[30] The Bobovers did not associate the Holocaust with Tisha B'av or Yom HaShoah. Rather, they saw Purim as the most opportune time to commemorate their struggles and delight in their survival.

The Bobovers elevated Purim to be as important as the Day of Atonement by means of a midrashic play on words. Yom Kippurim was seen as Yom K'Purim, "a day like Purim." As Shira Epstein explains, "For them, a central theme prevails in both: repentance is requested and granted, and on these days, God is more attentive to supplication"[31] Intricate *minhagim* stemmed from this understanding, including a well-attended Rebbe's tish, a carnival, and perhaps most important, a purimshpiel. These Purim plays, dating to at least the 16th century, were common among Eastern and Western Jews until the World War II. The Bobovers, wishing to hold on to this rich tradition, brought the purimshpiel with them to the United States after the war. It became a primary mode through which they could express their sufferings during the Holocaust, and their faith in God. They are the only community that continues to perform this type of folk drama each Purim, making it one of the most important events of the year.

The Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp and the Bobover Hasidic community of Brooklyn offer two different modes of adapting Purim customs in a way that proves meaningful for them. This paper will also discuss ways in which people commemorated Purim during the Holocaust, as well as within American liberal congregations. Each understood that holidays of the past can carry a great deal of contemporary meaning if we have the audacity to apply them to our lives. Some adaptations centered on the customs

[30] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 195-6.
[31] Ibid., 196.

of the Megillah reading, others the shpiels, others yet, the food and gifts, or pranks and carnival humor. This section will dedicate a chapter to each.

CHAPTER 1:

THE CENTER OF IT ALL: READING THE MEGILLAH

There are four mitzvot Jews are obligated to observe on Purim, including 1) reading the Megillah, (2) sending *mishloa'ach manot*, gifts to at least two individuals, (3) sending *matanot l-ev'yonim*, gifts to people who are poor, and (4) enjoying a Purim *se'udah*, a festive meal. The final three of the requirements originate in the text of *Megillat Esther*:

> כַּיָּמִים, אֲשֶׁר-נָחוּ בָהֶם הַיְּהוּדִים מֵאֹיְבֵיהֶם, וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נֶהְפַּךְ לָהֶם מְיָגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה, וּמֵאֵבֶל לְיוֹם טוֹב; לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם, יְמֵי מִשְׁתֶּה וְשִׂמְחָה, וּמִשְׁלֹחַ מָנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ, וּמַתָּנוֹת לָאֶבְיוֹנִים.
>
> [Mordecai charged the Jews to observe the 14th and 15th of Adar each year]—the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to people who are poor.[32]

Megillat Esther was written hundreds of years before the Rabbis and their descendants outlined religious obligations.[33] Nonetheless, in a single verse, this text lays the foundation for the mitzvot of sending gifts to one another[34], giving *tzedakah* to people

---

[32] *Megillat Esther* 9:22, translation is an adaptation of *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

[33] Scholars do not agree on when the text was written, though most agree it happened within the late Persian or early Greek period, dating the text to some time between 400 and 200 BCE. For information on this timeline, see Adele Berlin "Introduction," *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society), 2001, p. xli-xliii. The Babylonian Talmud was not codified until at least 600 years later.

[34] See Megillah 7b *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 2:14- 2:17.

who are poor[35], and celebrating the anniversary of this miraculous holiday with feasts and joy.[36]

The first Purim mitzvah, reading the Megillah, is not outlined in the text itself. This obligation was ordained by the Rabbis, centuries later. Megillah 2a and PT Megillah 1:5 outline the importance of reading this text each year. Megillah 3b goes so far as to say that the reading and studying of the Megillah should have priority over not only Torah study, but also other mitzvot, since the text is associated with *pirsumei nisa*, spreading awareness of God's miracles. Since it is fitting at all times—both day and night—to praise God for this miraculous salvation, Megillah 4a requires us to read the entire Megillah during the evening as well as the morning.

Although reading *Megillat Esther* is not mentioned within the scroll itself, it can be considered the most important of the Purim mitzvot. Taking the Megillah's text seriously leads to the observance of the other three mitzvot, outlined in Esther 9:22. In this way, the reading of *Megillat Esther* is the central element of Purim. It is not surprising that there are more rules around how this text should be read than about any other aspect of this holiday. Men and women, children and adults alike, are required to read the Megillah. This mitzvah became so important, in fact, that no one is permitted to miss a single word, read the text out of order, or recite it from memory. Joseph Caro, Rambam, the Rashba, the Radbaz, the Chofetz Chayim, and other rabbinic scholars extrapolate on these laws, adding layers of requirements and meaning, further indicating this mitzvah's significance.

---

[35] See Megillah 4b; Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 694:2-3; Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 2:14- 2:17.
[36] See Megillah 5b; Karo, *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 695:1; Maimonides *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 2:14- 2:17.

On the Shabbat before Purim, we prepare ourselves for *Megillat Esther* with *Shabbat Zachor*, on which we read specifically selected Torah and Haftarah texts. The Torah portion includes Deuteronomy 25:17-19, which asks us to remember the evil ways of Amalek, and thereby inculcating hatred also, of Haman, one of Amalek's descendants: "Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore…you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!"

The Haftarah portion adds to this message. In 1 Samuel 15:1-34, God tells King Saul to destroy all the Amalekites. Saul kills everyone except for one exception: King Agag. As the Rabbis understand it, on Agag's last night (before Samuel ultimately kills him) he impregnates a woman who gives birth to Haman. No wonder Saul's act of mercy fills God with rage.

Dahlia Rudavsky argues, however, that the continuation of Amalek's line may show that God's command to kill all Amalekites was too harsh. "Spilling blood indiscriminately cannot bring an end to the excesses of power. The slaughter of innocents does not bring about the eradication of evil."[37] As Rudavsky explains, "The license of Purim allows us to explore answers to the troubling questions that arise about our response to the persistence of evil, and under cover of intoxication, to reject with the sanction of tradition both Biblical commands and resulting conventions which seem cruel and unwarranted, and the portrayal of God as one who would order such actions."[38] Whatever the Rabbis' original motive for including this Torah and Haftarah reading,

---

[37] Dahlia C Rudavsky, "In Defense of Tradition: Haftarat Zachor in the Light of Purim," *Judaism* 47:1 (Winter 1998), 85.
[38] Ibid., 87.

Rudavsky's perspective indicated that for our time, at least, these portions force us to grapple with some of the more disconcerting aspects of this holiday: those of hatred, anger, and revenge.

The Megillah sets the stage for this unique holiday with what Monford Harris calls "topsy-turvy" elements. The heroine has two names (Esther and *Hadassah*), and we refer to her by the name that is not Jewish. Mordecai is not originally a Jewish name. Despite the importance placed on marriage and procreation in Judaism, the only character in the story to be married and have children is Haman. Counter to what we might expect, the characters are assimilated, and do not express a longing for Israel. The word *dat*, or law, appears twenty times throughout the text despite the story's sense of lawlessness. Even though we consider *Megillat Esther* to be a religious text, it does not mention God even once.[39] Each of these details demonstrates how different Purim is from every other Jewish holiday.

The "topsy-turvy" nature of the text and of the holiday that follows from it inspires equally topsy-turvy rituals. For example, although we are required to hear each word of the Megillah, we make noise to drown out Haman's name each time the text mentions it. The Rabbis trace that necessity to Deuteronomy 25:19, which commands us to "blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven"—a remembrance that extends to *Megillat Esther*'s nemesis, Haman. Noisemaking at the mention of Haman's name dates to the earliest days of the Megillah's recitation. Oriental Jews wrote Haman's name of a piece of paper, erasing it each time they heard it. Alternatively, they wrote his

[39] Monford Harris "Purim: The celebration of Dis-order" *Judaism* 26 (1977), 161-170.

name on the bottom of their shoes, literally stomping it out.[40] In some 13th-century European countries, children drew Haman's name or figure on stones or pieces of wood, and knocked them together until it was obliterated.[41] The practice of using groggers to blot out Haman's name originated in thirteenth century France and Germany.[42] These groggers could be simple noisemakers with minimal craftsmanship, or elaborate pieces of artistic workmanship. One nineteenth-century grogger from Russia was complete with whistle, bells, a rattle and even a tiny golden Haman swinging inside."[43] Over time, communities all over the world have used groggers as their primary way of blotting out Haman's name during the Megillah reading, although there have been exceptions. Seventeenth-century Leon de Modena wrote that while reading *Megillat Esther*, Venice Jews would "clap their hands at the name of Haman, as a testimony of their utter abhorrence and detestation"[44] Despite this and other variations in practice, children and adults alike delight in making as much noise as possible upon hearing Haman's name. Throughout time, it has provided a festive atmosphere, as well as an opportunity to celebrate the downfall of the many Hamans throughout Jewish history. Even in desperate times, it provides an opportunity for Jews to maintain hope that the Jewish People will prevail despite the enemies and hardships they face.

Some Jews throughout history have taken offense to blotting out Haman's name. A small number of communities have forbidden these customs, either because they found them to be "a flagrant violation of synagogue decorum," or, more likely, out of fear that

---

[40] A. W. Binder, "Purim in Music," in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 211.
[41] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, 324.
[42] Binder, "Purim in Music," 211.
[43] Rachel Winshnitzer, "The Esther Story in Art," in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), p. 248.
[44] Bernard Picart, *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of Various Nations of the Known World*, vol 1. (London: W. Jackson, 1733), 69.

the surrounding community would respond with hostility.[45] In 1783 the board of trustees at the Spanish-Portuguese congregation of London went so far as to rule that making a noise during the Megillah reading would be punishable by eviction from the synagogue![46]

At various times throughout history, outside forces have actually banned Jews from coming together to read *Megillat Esther*. In 1941, for example, Hitler banned Jews from reading the Megillah, using noisemakers of any type, or even keeping synagogues open in Poland. Nonetheless, believing the Megillah reading to be of great importance, and perhaps even hoping it would help their situation, many Jews gathered in basements and attics to partake in this ritual.[47] During the same Purim, Jews gathered in underground air shelters throughout London to read the scroll. The English Jewish youth movement, *Habonim*, warned Jews not to make noise during the Megillah reading, saying, "This year the usual rattles must not be used. They are illegal."[48] Nonetheless, Jews did whatever they could to observe the festive nature of this day.

Holocaust survivor J. J. Cohen recalls his experience reading the scroll from within the concentration camp. As he woke up from a fever-induced sleep, he recalled that it was Purim, and tried to assemble a *minyan*, and find someone who could recall even a few verses of the *Megillat Esther*. He recalls:

> "And then as if to show that God particularly desires Jews to perform mitzvot with true dedication, a small miracle occurred: A copy of the second book of the Bible, with the complete *Megillat Esther* appended, was discovered by my friend, Itche Perelman, a member of the camp burial squad. Our elation was immeasurable! Such a find was awesome! It could only be a sign that our prayers had been received in

[45] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology,* 325-6. In 1866, the *Kehillah* of Rogasen, Poland was among those to forbid the use of groggers on Purim. See Michael M Zarchin, *Jews in the Province of Posen*, (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1939), 74.
[46] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, 325-6.
[47] Ibid., 374.
[48] Ibid., 375.

> heaven and the redemption was about to begin. Our excitement grew to a feverish pitch. Who remembered the hunger, the cold, the filth, the degradation? No one gave a thought to the dangers involved in organizing a *minyan* and reading the Megillah, to the possibility of the Germans or a kapo deciding to drop in on our hut. Even the nonreligious ones who only yesterday had scoffed at the 'crazy Chassidim' were filled with excitement at this great event."[49]

Even Jews with no former religious practice were delighted to hear the words of *Megillat Esther*. Like the other inmates, they were willing to put everything on the line in order to read the Purim story. The text spoke to them deeply and profoundly. Cohen read the verses of the scroll, and when he reached the piece about Haman's downfall, the Jews surrounding him lit up with hope that they would live to see a miracle in their own time. As he finished, everyone cheered, and the room's atmosphere changed. Whereas previously these Jews had been fighting over food, they now offered one another their remaining scraps, allowing them to fulfill the mitzvah of *mishlo'ach manot*. The scroll brought out their sense of community and generous spirit towards one another.

It was not coincidental that Hitler or outside forces forbade Jews from reading *Megillat Esther*, or that despite the consequences, Jews continued to do all they could to uphold this custom. With its layers of meaning and obligation, *Megillat Esther* spoke to the Jews in a way no other tradition could.

Another example of the power this reading has had upon Jews in dire times comes from 1946, among the Jews of the Displaced Persons Center in Landsberg, Germany. The Megillah reading allowed Jews to both celebrate their liberation and mourn for all they had lost. A tone of seriousness overtook the atmosphere when a member of the community came up to read the Megillah. "Jamnik, dressed in the striped uniform of the concentration camp… read a chapter of the Megillah in a heartfelt traditional melody. It

---

[49] J. J. Cohen "Holocaust survivor recalls Purim in he Valley of Tears," *Jewish Weekly*, March 17, 2000.

struck the very center of the aching Jewish heart. It brought to life events, pictures of our past home, our wanderings…"[50] The text of *Megillat Esther* would have been powerful on its own for these newly liberated Jews. But Jamnik enhanced its words even further with the traditional melody, indicative of a once flourishing past, and his costume, reminiscent of these Jews' recent struggles. The imagery of a newly liberated man garbed in the clothing of a concentration camp, while chanting the words of our People's victory over an enemy wishing to annihilate the Jewish People must have resonated powerfully.

Followed by this heartfelt retelling of the story, several members of the community offered speeches, reinterpreting the text of *Megillat Esther* and the spirit of the holiday for their time. Two such speakers were Dr. Samuel Gringauz and Jacob Olieski. Grigauz remarked,

> "History has shown us that the battle against Jews is a battle against humanity…. We… must learn from these bloody experiences and feel the commandment of the hour…Purim 5706 will be for us not only a day of feasting and gladness; we celebrate today's festival…under the banner of work and battle for freedom."[51]

Of particular interest is the universal lesson that the speakers drew on the occasion. The holocaust was not the first time an enemy sought to destroy the Jewish People, Gringauz began. But whenever this happens, he explained, it is not just an act against one People, but against all of humanity. He called upon his fellow to Jews to learn from their painful experiences by celebrating their liberation and continuing to fight for freedom. Olieski added to this sentiment, when he said,

> "Hitler Germany was the embodiment of the bestial jungle. The beast is conquered, not only for us, but for all of humanity. This is the meaning of the festival that we celebrate today. A year ago today, in the concentration camps, we did not imagine that the

[50] Blum-Dobkin, "The Landsberg Carnival," 55-56.
[51] Ibid., 55-56.

> prophecy of the Prophet Ezekiel would be fulfilled: 'dry bones' again become a living People. We must rebuild our lives from the ground up and build our own home."[52]

Having been miraculously liberated from "the bestial jungle," they now faced the opportunity to rebuild, argued Olieski. They would once again have a home.

When the speeches were complete, the community stood to sing the words of *Hatikvah*—a song fellow Jews sung on the way to their deaths in the gas chambers. They added to this Hayyim Nachman Bialik's 1894 poem *Techezakna*, "Let our hands be strong." This poem had multiple meanings in its own right. The poem's first two words, תחזקנה ידי, hark back to 2 Samuel 2:7, when David tells the People to be strong as they mourned for the loss of their King Saul, who had recently died in battle. Facing their own hardship, these words were meant to give contemporary listeners similar comfort. תחזקנה also appears in Zechariah 8:9, when God tells the remnant of the People Israel, who have just gone through a great deal of hardship, to be strong, because God is with them. Having just lived through their own nightmare, these Holocaust survivors could find parallel comfort in the message of this poem. But its meaning did not end there. Bialik's words were originally penned with those who wished to live in Eretz Yisrael in mind. Many of the listeners, also dreamed of moving to the Land of Israel, a place where they believed the Jewish People could be strong once again.

As Hitler's regime grew, Britain's chief rabbi, Joseph Hertz, delivered a 1935 sermon on why Haman was seen as the enemy of all Jews, not just the Jews whom he wished to kill in the Persian Empire. It was because Haman's proposal, he explained "encouraged the Hamans in all other lands, near and far, to preach his doctrine. Even so is it in our day. There are elements in most countries that are impatiently awaiting the

---

[52] Ibid., 56.

hour when they can follow Germany's example"[53] In 1939, historian Simon Dubnow echoed Hertz's sentiment in describing European politics as "the epoch of Haman."[54]

Dubnow was no Zionist, but *Megillat Esther* was often cited at the time as a lesson to embrace Zionism. In 1946, for example, Leopold Neuhaus wrote a sermon for his fellow holocaust survivors, remarking that Purim is a popular holiday because of the ease with which *Megillat Esther* relates to the lives of all Jews in exile. Many times throughout history, God saved the Jewish People from annihilation, he explained—most recently from the holocaust. Nazi Germany could have killed them all; their survival was nothing short of a miracle. Purim "has become a popular festival for all who, as righteous Jews like Mordecai, do not wish to bow before hostile forces; we do not wish to be two faced souls who bow to those above but trample upon those below." It teaches us to be righteous and to overcome the challenges of living outside the land of Israel. Neuhaus attributed the Jewish People's survival to a divine miracle. He called upon his fellow survivors to be grateful for their redemption and to be righteous despite the inhumanity they had recently lived through. "When we celebrate Purim in the year 5706", he said, out of gratitude for our survival "we ought to say the *Shehechyanu*" before reading the Book of Esther.[55] Likewise, Bernard Berenson of Italy wrote in his 1943 diary "Like the ants, the Jews never lose faith in life….Hamans and Hitlers everywhere; they live on, and enjoy life."[56] Such voices offered survivors words of strength and encouragement as they began to heal from an unimaginable past.

---

[53] This sermon appears in Rabbi Joseph Hertz' *Sermons, Addresses and Studies*, vol 2, p 211-212.
[54] Elliot Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006), 90.
[55] Leopold Neuhaus, "Purim 5706," in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 159-161.
[56] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 90.

As the central Purim ritual, *Megillat Esther* offered Jews throughout history, including Holocaust inmates and survivors, depth in meaning. Its pertinent message, interpretations, and powerful rituals enabled many, for the first time, to celebrate their victory and mourn their defeats in a Jewish context. Although there were other holidays between liberation and Purim, Toby Blum-Dobkin explains that "The traditional Purim atmosphere of release, excitement, and permissiveness was particularly suited to the emotional needs of the time."[57]

[57] Blum-Dobkin, "The Landsberg Carnival," 58.

CHAPTER 2:

PURIMSHPIELS: THE DRAMA WITHIN

In addition to speeches, interpretations, and the blotting out of Haman's name, *Megillat Esther* proved to be the inspiration for another popular Purim custom: the purimshpiel. This innovation enabled Jews to creatively reinterpret the book of Esther, and to more fully participate in the celebratory nature of the day.

Development of the Purimshpiel:

Lack of documentation makes it is difficult to determine the origin of the purimshpiel.[58] The *Tanakh* includes elements of satire, and the Rabbis demonstrate hilarity within the Talmud, but none of this can be classified as parody. According to Israel Davidson, parody, the literary convention that led to the creation of the purimshpiel, originated only in the twelfth-century. "For the twelfth-century was the golden age in Jewish literature, having such authors as Judah Halevi, Abraham and Moses ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Harizi among its representative men." For example, this century gave birth to Menahem ben Aaron's *Hymn for the First Night of Purim*, parodying Meier ben Isaac's *Hymn for the First Night of Passover*. He writes: "This night (of Purim) is a night for drunkards, a night for wine-drinking and rejoicing… On this night all creation is intoxicated…. The day of Purim is a day of feasting and drinking and merrymaking."[59]

---

[58] Jacob Shatzky, "The History of Purim Plays," in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 357.
[59] Israel Davidson, "The History of Purim Parody in Jewish Literature," in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 331.

In the fourteenth-century, parodying becomes a distinct branch of Provencal and Italian literature.[60] Between 1319 and 1332, three parodies turn this form of satire form into an art. The first was *Masseket Purim - Kalonymos ben Kalonymos*, which parodies the style, diction and breadth of the Talmud while it "ridicules the drunkard and the glutton, laughs at the miser, and reproaches the idler and the professional mendicant….Occasionally we meet with a grotesque passage, the story of the glutton who doffed his clothes and dived into a bowl of soup to look for his portion of meat."[61] *Sefer ha-Bakbuk ha-Nabi*, "Book of the Prophet Bottle," imitates prophetic language in presenting a parody of a bottle acting as a prophet, trying to convince the Jewish People to worship the vineyard. Finally, *Megillat Setarim*, "Scroll of Secrecy," by Levi ben Gershon parodies *Mishnah Avot* by imitating its diction, style and the structure.[62]

According to Davidson, hostility "to the humorous treatment of sacred texts" led to the virtual disappearance of comedy from Jewish literature between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries (outside of a few scattered wine songs). In the middle of the seventeenth-century, the tradition of hilarity was revived in parodies such as *The Humourous Letter for Purim*, which addressed the "mighty in drink," and the fifth and final version of *Messechat Purim*, a composite work by many authors.[63]

While not disputing Davidson's general theory of the development of parody in Jewish literature, Chone Shmeruk disagrees with his timeline. A teacher named Gumprecht used the term "purimshpiel" in the 1555 Venice manuscript of a long poem about *Megillat Esther*. The context in which he used the term demonstrates that by the

---

[60] Examples include the hymn of Menahem ben Aaron and the Parody of the *Azharot* by Rabbi Elijah ha-Zaken. See Davidson, "The History of Purim Parody in Jewish Literature," 332.
[61] Ibid., 334-5.
[62] Ibid., 337-8.
[63] Ibid., 338-352.

sixteenth-century, purimshpiels had already become widespread. By the sixteenth, not the seventeenth-century, he argues, the custom of the purimshpiel had become widespread among Ashkenazi communities.[64]

Jacob Shatzky predates the earliest plays all the way back to fifteenth-century Germany. These texts included "parodistic monologues, sketches impersonating some popular characters and types in Jewish communal life and vivid impersonations of local worthies." Many of them were "morality plays in the form of dialogues between Good and Evil, Summer and Winter, Learned and Ignoramus."[65] As the Jewish community migrated to Poland, these plays moved with them, adapting so successfully to their new culture that Christians too eagerly attended them, and crowd control became a necessity.[66] Over-exaggerated characters made up a large part of the appeal, with the role of the fool supplying particular comedic relief. Improvisation was another draw; although all players knew the story, often the words themselves were unplanned.

Purimshpiel actors included some of the poorest members of a community, who performed with the intention of collecting gifts. Individuals went door to door, offering short shpiels in order to collect as many contributions as possible. In Poland, members of local charities performed as a means to gain funding for their causes. People responded enthusiastically because these shpiels not only contributed to the celebratory spirit of the holiday, by lifting the Jew "above the level of his tedious and often depressing

---

[64] Chone Shmuruk, "The Origins of the 'Purimshpil' and its 16th-century Remnants," in *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979), 44.
[65] Shatzky, "The History of Purim Plays," 357-8.
[66] Ibid., 358-9.

environment," but also because it provided "a realm of freedom where the Jew could be assured of ultimate triumph over his enemies.[67]

Over time, the purimshpiel structure changed. They began as one person productions, though under the influence of the German *Fastnachtshpiel,* their structures changed by the 16th-century. There are many parallels between the structure of the purimshpiel and the German *Fastnachtspiel* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Both performed on festive days known for relaxed inhibitions, the opening and concluding sections of these traditions are similar. Much like the purimshpiel, there are three types of *Fastnachtshpiels*: (1) monologues, (2) group presentations consisting of many monologues of a common theme, and (3) a play with a discernable dramatic plot. *Fastnachtshpiels* included elements of more than one of these categories.[68] Purimshpiels came to involve multiple actors performing a series of monologues connected to a theme. They had a defined structure, including a rhymed prologue, a text, the central text, varying from a poem recited by one actor to play with many characters, and an epilogue which includes an ask for compensation for the entertainment they just provided.[69] The earliest shpiels were purely comedic, having nothing to do directly with the story of *Megillat Esther.* In the seventeenth-century, they began to focus on biblical stories, such as "Esther and Ahasuerus," "Joseph and His Brothers," "The Binding of Isaac," and "David and Goliath." By the eighteenth-century, the purimshpiel began condensing the story into a simple form that allowed poor young boys to run from house to house all night long, performing poems such as:

---

[67] Ibid., 361, 366-7.
[68] Shmuruk, "The Origins of the 'Purimshpil' and its 16th-century Remnants," 46.
[69] Ibid., 44-45.

Happy Purim! Happy Purim!
May Haman get all kinds of pains.
Pains should come upon him
Because he persecuted Mordecai the pious
And the whole Jewish community
Great and small.
But God denied him that satisfaction
And he hangs on the hallows.
We Jews are gladdened
And drink to the health of Mordecai.
So give me a little glass of wine
So that we can all be glad…
And some money too alongside it.
Do not make me stand too long
For I must continue on my way.

This highly abbreviated presentation was most common in large communities containing many performers. Audiences lacked the patience required to sit through dozens of lengthy shpiels, and performers wished to collect donations from as many people as possible. As a result, performers opted for brevity.[70]

The purimshpiel adapted to the trends of the greater community, as well as the needs of the Jewish community. Yet, its structure maintained the same relative conventions, with the spirit of laughter and entertainment, parody and social comment. The purimshpiel remained popular because of its focus on redemption from impending destruction. As Shmeruk explains, "The Purim theme of escape from spiritual and actual annihilation has for generations given Jewish communities all over the world the security and eagerness to encourage theatrical merrymaking."[71]

In some parts of Europe, Purim players gave birth to Yiddish theater and other forms of higher level of humor.[72] Consisting of dramatic representations of biblical

[70] Ibid., 45-6.
[71] Ibid., 45.
[72] One example of high Purim art is the 1708 production of *Commedia dell' Arte* in Frankfort on the Main. See Shatzky, "The History of Purim Plays," 367.

stories, these shpiels, originating in the early eighteenth-century, became frivolous versions of medieval English interludes and miracle plays.[73] In their many forms, purimshpiels remained popular until World War II, which interrupted the tradition.

During the Holocaust, there were not many opportunities to maintain this custom. During the war, people did whatever they could to deny death, pushing themselves to live as fully as possible. As survivor Aharon Appelfeld explains, in the aftermath of the war,

> "People were filled with silence. Everything that happened was so gigantic, so unconceivable, that the witness even seemed like a fabricator to himself. The feeling that your experience cannot be told, that no one can understand it, is perhaps one of the worst that was felt by the survivors after the war. Add to that the feeling of guilt, and you find that with your own hands you have built a vast platform of misunderstanding for yourself. The feeling of vocation that throbbed within you in the camps and in the woods became, imperceptibly, an indictment of yourself."[74]

Some wished to break out of this isolation, in order to tell their suppressed stories, though no words could suffice. Soon, entertainment troops began to pop up, with actors, singers, poets, comedians, and other performers of all ages. They traveled from camp to camp, entertaining fellow survivors. On one level, these performances were meant "to restore [everyone] back to life," and on another "it was a kind of protest against suffering and sorrow; but above all it was forgetfulness," a response to the indescribable, and unending grief they had experienced. At first, Appelfeld explains, he detested these attempts at entertainment because in the aftermath of pain and suffering, these displays did not seem appropriate. Now he understands that they "filled the emptiness that threatened to engulf us."[75] Art forms such as performances, drawings and poems gave expression to an

---

[73] Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition*, 68-69.
[74] Aharon Appelfeld, "After the Holocaust," in *Writing and the Holocaust*, trans. Jeffrey M Green, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 86.
[75] Ibid., 87-88.

otherwise unspeakable pain.[76] The Purimshpiel became one means of artistic expression. Even before the worst of the Holocaust, Haim Sloves wrote a Nazi-themed purimshpiel in 1940. Months after the end of the war, the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center performed a purimshpiel, expressing their emotional state of mind. The Bobover community would later use the purimshpiel as a central way in which to express their Holocaust survivor mentality. In this chapter, we will explore each of these in detail.

Homens Mapole

Haim Sloves was an Eastern European Jewish intellectual, who wrote *Homens mapole*, "The Downfall of Haman" as "an act of resistance" against Hitler's regime in 1940. The piece was meant to serve as a "source of inspiration for the Jewish People," through the mode of Yiddish theater.[77] An enthusiastic Yiddishist, Sloves saw theater as a secular alter, symbolizing "an access to transcendence both like and unlike prayer."[78] It had the potential to elevate people from the difficult state of their everyday experiences. Sloves adapted the avant-guard style of theater from the surrounding culture in order to create an experience that "would transform people from spectators into actors in their own lives by showing them the malleable nature of social conditions and by making them aware of conflicts and contradictions."[79] Sloves blurred the lines between audience and performers by inviting people to experience the play's plot on a personal level, encouraging spontaneous emotional reactions and other forms of audience participation. Yiddish theater further represented a sense of community, by not only bringing Jews

[76] Ibid., 91-92.
[77] Annette Aronowicz, "The Downfall of Haman: Postwar Yiddish Theater Between Secular and Sacred," *AJS Review* 32:2 (2008): 369.
[78] Ibid., 377-378.
[79] Ibid., 380.

together for an interactive theater experience, but also harking back to a theater tradition that had been popular since the 1870s.[80]

With a strong sense of community entwined within, Yiddish theater provided an ideal forum to express the difficulties of living under the Nazi regime. With so many obvious parallels between *Megillat Esther* and daily experiences, the purimshpiel was an appropriate venue. Sloves dealt with the story of Esther creatively, adapting it to speak to the world in which he lived. Deeply secular, he shied away from religious understandings of Purim.[81] Rather, he emphasized the courage and ingenuity that human beings possess in the face of a hostile outside force. Highly influenced by Sloves' dedication to universality of the human experience, and his sympathies with Communism, the play focused on Jews as a People just like any other, rather than on its particularity. Haman's deep hatred for Mordecai stemmed not from Mordecai refusing to bow, which would emphasize Jewish particularity, but, instead, from Mordecai's refusal to match Haman up with Esther, the woman with whom he fell in love. "The secularizing impulse in Sloves' innovations can be read as his effort to displace the notion of the Jews as the chosen People, as a nation unlike other nations."[82]

Sloves artistically plays with the facts of the day and the text of *Megillat Esther* itself. In one scene, Mordecai tries to get out of identifying himself. A policeman screams, "Show me your false papers right now!" since the occupation often involved false documents. Sloves then mocks the Nazi definition of who is a Jew in a humorous conversation between the two. Mordecai questions the guard about whether it is a

---

[80] Ibid., 358-360.
[81] For example he would not put forth the rabbinic understanding that the Jews were in danger for turning away from the commandments, and when they turned back, God saved them.
[82] Ibid., 372-3.

problem that his grandmother is Jewish. The guard denies this claim, explaining that the children of his grandmother testified in court that she was childless. The play further blurs the lines between Jews and non-Jews as German characters utter Yiddish phrases and demonstrate Jewish knowledge. Haman even asks to say a *vidui* before his death. At one point, Sloves demonstrates the gap between text and reality, when the guard remarks that he doesn't remember Mordecai becoming a matchmaker in the Book of Esther. Mordecai responds saying that many things are now true that were beyond the imagination of our sages.[83]

The play's humor turns dark as Haman denounces Jews and calls for their execution when they refuse to eat with him. The king asks what they eat, to find out that they have potatoes every day, and on Shabbat, potato kugel. Here, "The humor, juxtaposed to Haman's murderous tones, displaces the horror," and "makes it veer toward the ludicrous." Each of these features "confused the line between the lowly and high, the insider and outsider, the serious and ludicrous, the truth and fiction, and finally, reality and illusion."[84]

Sloves wrote *Homens Mapole* before Nazis sent millions to die in concentration camps, death marches, and other horrifying events of the Holocaust. When the war ended, the play functioned as a distraction, keeping "recent horrors of the war at bay," but it also became "a window onto a certain experience of hope," reflecting "the reentry into life of a group of Jews, in the aftermath of a very great destruction."[85] Jews appreciated this opportunity to express the unimaginable events of their past.

---

[83] Annette Aronowicz "*Homens mapole*: Hope in the Immediate Postwar Period," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98:3 (Summer 2008): 381-382.
[84] Ibid., 383.
[85] Ibid., 355.

Homens Mapole appears to have no simple moral lesson, but after living through an excess of horror, it was appropriate to see a play in which nothing quite fits.[86] Nonetheless, by focusing on the resistance Mordecai emulates, the play served a powerful function in empowering the People to bring about change. Like resistance fighters in the ghetto, they should continue their fight against the remnants of evil that remained even after Hitler's defeat.[87] With a plot demonstrating Jews' triumph over their worst enemies, Sloves intended for the play to give Jews courage. Although Yiddish and Yiddish theater would come to represent a lost world, at that point it was rebirth. Annette Aronowicz explains that in the aftermath of the war, "to hear Yiddish rising on stage, to see a maligned culture that had been destined for oblivion lifting its head boldly again, was to witness the rising of the Jewish People itself." Despite everything they went through, Yiddish theater remained, representing the revival of Jewish life. In fact, opening night in Bergen Belsen, the play struck the community so profoundly that the audience was inspired to spontaneously sing *Hatikva*.[88]

Not everyone was so pleased. By the time the play picked up steam, the war had come to a close. While some found the lightheartedness of this play to be entertaining, others felt the dark subject matter was inappropriate in the wake of the Holocaust.[89] Furthermore, there was a tangible difference between the comedy of *Homens Mapole* and the tragedy the play's observers lived through. The play discusses catastrophe averted, even though survivors had not been so lucky. In it "Haman, the great enemy of the Jews is hanged. Everyone rejoices. Yet the spectators as well as the cast had lost entire worlds,

---

[86] Ibid., 384.
[87] "The Downfall of Haman" 374; "*Homens Mapole*" 357.
[88] "*Homens Mapole*" 361-2, 365-6
[89] Ibid., 357.

their families, their friends, their homes."[90] People had not yet caught up with the events of the war. It would take another fifteen years or more for survivors and the world to grapple with recent events.[91]

For many, the play was incredibly appropriate. Jews knew that something terrible had happened to them, but they wished to minimize the catastrophe for a number of reasons. It was impossible to face the enormity of their horror, they desperately wished to safely fit into the larger society in which they lived, and they wished to affirm life wherever possible. For these survivors, *Homens Mapole* can be seen in one of two ways: "as a fabrication of an illusion necessary for psychological or political reasons" or "as a lucid call to put aside the despair in order to choose life."[92] In a review in the Paris Yiddish Communist Daily, *Naye Prese*, entitled *Homens Mapole, A Velen Lebn*: "A Will to Live," the reviewer agreed with this sentiment. He wrote that the color, movement and sound of the play affirmed life as if "light emerging from a dark background."[93]

Homens Mapole was able to capitalize on the topsy-turvy nature of both the Purimshpiel and Yiddish theater, adding comedy to a dark past. Some took offense at its light-hearted nature, though his great popularity demonstrates the great need for this type of expression in the years just following the war.

Landsberg Displaced Persons Camp

In 1946, Jewish survivors of the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center performed a short undocumented shpiel in which they masqueraded as SS officers, death camp

[90] Ibid., 370- 372.
[91] Ibid., 373.
[92] Ibid., 378.
[93] Ibid., 357.

detainees and even Hitler. This was a reversal of their Holocaust experiences, allowing them to take on the personas of their greatest enemies. While imitation can be a type of flattery, Toby Blum Dobkin explains that "it can also be a powerful weapon and a strong form of ridicule. By assuming the persona of Hitler, a liberated Jew can illustrate his complete power over his former opposer." He can control the actions of his character, mocking the Nazi culture, and emphasizing a transfer of power. A liberated Jew dressed in the striped suit of a concentration camp was able to dramatize his change in status. In this way, actors within the shpiel emphasized the reversals present in their lives, aptly appropriate for the Purim holiday, which focuses on the "topsy-turvy."[94]

The Bobover Chasidic Community

The Bobover Chasidic community elevates Purim to one of the most important Jewish holidays of the year. They understand *Yom Kippurim*, "Day of Atonement" as *Yom K' Purim*- "Day *comparable <u>to</u>* Purim." As social anthropologist Shifra Epstein explains, "For them, a central theme prevails in both: repentance is requested and granted, and on these days, God is more attentive to supplication."[95] The Galician branches of Hasidim, which includes the Bobovers, are especially mystical in practice. They believe that the purimshpiel itself holds sacred powers. Through it, they can express their desires as a kind of supplication to God. They believe that in especially troubled times, God is capable of endowing actors within a purimshpiel with the power to change history by altering current events within the play. The Hasidic sage known as the Shpoler

[94] Shifra Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl: From Folk Drama for Purim to a Ritual of Transcending the Holocaust," in *New World Hasidim: Ethnographic Studies of Hasidic Jews in America*, edited by Janet S. Belcove-Shalin (Albany: State University of New York, 1995), 246.
[95] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 196.

Zeide, for example, is said to have been able to save a Jew from Kishinev from false accusations by performing a play on Purim with a desirable outcome.[96] Similarly, when the Jews of Nemirov couldn't pay the salt tax, the rebbe suggested they perform a purimshpiel on the problem, successfully appealing in it to the aristocracy for leniency. In both cases, the outcomes were recalled as being favorable.[97]

The Bobovers take the link between Yom Kippur and Purim even a step further when they incorporate the wretched events of the Holocaust into their joyous Purim celebrations. To this day, they incorporate themes, images and beliefs connected to the Holocaust in their purimshpiels. Epstein believes that this demonstrates an inability to fully come to terms with this painful past. "For Hasidim, man's limited perspective does not permit a full grasp of the Holocaust, and therefore, no human being can create an appropriate ritual to commemorate the Holocaust." Hence, these Hasidim choose not to remember Holocaust victims on Yom Hashoah, the 10th of Tevet or Tisha B'av.[98] Rather, through private memorial services called *yortzaytn*, they commemorate individual members of their families who perished in the Holocaust. They see Purim as a rare opportunity to mourn for Bobover Holocaust victims. They do this through a variety of activities, including songs of lament, Holocaust-themed purimshpiels, and the Rebbe's sermon, dedicated to remembering the "old country."[99] Through each of these customs, Bobovers strive to come to terms with the events of the Holocaust.

The purimshpiel is performed in the context of the rebbe's tisch on Shusan Purim, which includes a communal meal, singing, dancing, and a sermon. The rebbe's relatives

---

[96] Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl," 240, 253.
[97] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 199.
[98] Recently the Bobover community has begun to create liturgy to commemorate Holocaust victims on Tisha B'av.
[99] Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl, 241-242.

surround him, as yeshiva students pile up on tiers of benches. In connecting the purimshpiel to the tisch, the Bobover community elevates it to "into a major event in the Bobover religious life."[100]

The Bobover Hasidim place special emphasis on the purimshpiel itself, as a piece central to both their beliefs and practices of Purim. It "is a moment of extraordinary self-display in which the participants enact and transmit their own visions of their sacred world." They dramatize themes of the Bible and Hasidic life, highlighting and elaborating upon moralistic stories.[101]

Considering the importance of the purimshpiel, it is surprising that preparation begins less than ten days before the event. The Bobover elementary school's principal oversees an ad hoc committee of craftsman, scene painters, musicians, writers and actors, who select a theme, and submit it to the rebbe for approval. Only after receiving the rebbe's blessing do they write the Yiddish and Hebrew text of the play, select music, create backdrops, and begin rehearsing. Changes are made up until the day of the performance.[102]

Since 1948, the Bobovers have created two main types of purimshpiels: those devoted to the Holocaust in plot themes and setting, and those more loosely focused on general Hasidic/Jewish history. The first category only includes one play, entitled *Tzayt in Farnumen Poyland*, "Times in Occupied Poland." Produced and performed in New York in 1948, survivor Rebbe Shlomo Halberstam requested this shpiel himself, so that the Bobover purimshpiel tradition would not be forgotten after the war. It reverses the events of the Holocaust when a young boy comes back to life from his own ashes. Just

[100] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 201-202.
[101] Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremspiyl," 241.
[102] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 201-202.

three years after the war, this was "an appropriate psychodrama," "providing survivors with the opportunity to act their emotions, anxieties, and beliefs connected with the Holocaust"[103]

Tzayt in Farnumen Poyland begins in the home of Bila Yakobowitz, in a Polish ghetto during World War II. Mourning the loss of her husband who had been sent to a death camp, Bila "clings to her sleeping child, Yankele, caressing him, as if the sixteen-year-old lad were a small child who could not even walk." She tries to reassure herself that SS officers will not return to take away her darling boy when she hears approaching footsteps. An SS officer breaks into the home, grabs her and asks "Are you Bila Yakobowitz? And this is your son? His sentence is stamped." They throw Bila to the ground, and take Yankele with them, leaving her alone, lying pathetically on the ground. Bila goes into a trance, fantasizing a scene several years later in which an SS officer comes to her door and says "here is your child…," while handing her a sack. She clings to it lovingly, and then realizes that inside are her son's ashes. She cries "These are the ashes of my Yankele, these are the ashes of my father, my mother, my brothers and sisters." Match in hand, she runs outside, lighting houses and trees on fire while screaming to the SS officer: "If you have made ashes from my Yankele, I will light everything which is lightable, and let burn everything that is burnable!...Now I have one request: Put me to death so I can be with my child in the same small sack of ashes." Just at this moment, the audience hears the American national anthem. Then, the final scene begins, at the end of the war, with American liberation. As American soldiers offer Bila first aid, she sees Yankele for the first time since his capture. It takes Bila a minute to realize that she is not dreaming; her son had miraculously returned. Yankele tenderly

[103] Ibid., 243-4.

says, “Mother, just as the rushing streams which create little islands are incapable of tearing themselves away, so will Yankele never tear himself from his mother.”[104]

Tzayt in Farnumen Poyland is a highly emotional and realistic tale of the Holocaust experience. It is not surprising that audience members reacted strongly; one woman even fainted. Despite its depressing content, the play was able to reverse the Holocaust experience by cheating death, and provide “a ritualistic channel to publicly proclaim belief in God and His miracles even during the Holocaust.” This offered the Bobovers an “opportunity to celebrate together their survival as individuals and as a community.” Although this purimshpiel proved meaningful for the community, the rebbe asked that they perform a more traditional purimshpiel in the future, which more aptly reflected Purim’s joyous spirit. The Bobover community never performed *Tzayt in Farnumen Poyland* again.[105]

After 1948, purimshpiels focused more generally on threats from past and present enemies of Jews and Hasidim, including but not limited to the Holocaust. They exemplify survival through suffering and extraordinary faith. Examples include the 1971 play *Hananiah, Mishael ve'Azaria, Daniel, Nevukhadnetser Melekh Buvel*, “Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, Daniel, Nebuchadnetzer king of Bavel” and the 1976 play *Akaides Yitskhek*, “The Binding of Isaac.”

Hananiah, Mishael ve'Azaria, Daniel, Nevukhadnetser Melekh Buvel focuses primarily on the book of Daniel. In Babylonian exile, King Nebuchadnezzar attempts to convert three Jewish children (Hananiah, Azariah and Mishael) to idolatry. They incorporate themes from the Holocaust in order to strengthen their sense of survival.

---

[104] Ibid., 244-245.
[105] Ibid., 245-246.

Reminiscent of the Holocaust, King Nebuchadnezzar says that he has already killed tens of thousands, and he will kill them, too, by throwing them into a furnace if they do not become Babylonian. He refers to the children as survivors, and asks them if they remember their family members who are now just ashes. The children reply, "Throw us into the oven, we don't fear for our blood and skin. This happened before in another time."[106]

Building on the correlation between *Yom Kippur* and Purim, the play uses liturgy from the Day of Atonement, including a Yiddish rendition of *Avinu Malkenu* "Father, our King." Facing their destruction, the children sing these words as a petition to God. Additional verses refer to Babylonian exile, the Holocaust, and plead for vindication of God's chosen People, who have been burnt to ashes. Hananiah exhibits great strength when he sings about the faith of Bobover Hasidim in the face of Nazi forces. The children then declare their faith with the words of the *Shema*.

The play demonstrates the Bobover belief that Hasidic victims of the Holocaust were holy martyrs, to be "praised for their acts as well as for taking their own lives rather than letting themselves fall into the hands of the Germans or the Ukrainians" The children demonstrate this great act of devotion with their preference for being thrown into a furnace, rather than to cease worshipping God. Azariah even recites a martyrdom blessing. Pesakh Schindler explains that this belief "enabled the Hasid to anticipate his tragic fate with some sort of dignity…in defiance of the enemy's objective to degrade and terminate life."[107] Although Holocaust victims were not able to control their dangerous

[106] Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl," 247-248.
[107] Ibid., 248-250.

environment, they were able, through great faith, to remain holy to their God. They made the ultimate sacrifice for a noble cause.

The play comes to a powerful end as the children are tied, and a furnace is brought on stage, reminiscent of incinerators at Polish death camps. As Nebuchadnezzar throws the children into the furnace, a fiddler plays *Ani Maamin*. To this day, this musical addition brings members of the community to tears, as survivors recall hearing Jews chant it on the way to their deaths in the ghettos and concentration camps.[108] God ultimately saves the children, forcing Nebuchadnezzar to admit defeat, and accept that God is powerful.

Both types of plays strike an emotional chord in the hearts of the Bobover community. They dramatize the anxiety-producing themes of danger, martyrdom, and redemption, while at the same time celebrating community strength, faith and survival.[109] During the purimshpiels, audience members interact by singing, shouting, laughing and crying.[110] Through inversions and reversals of a frivolous and serious nature, and a deep complexity of emotion, the purimshpiel becomes a "ritual transcending the experience of the Holocaust," offering community members "the opportunity to confront and come to terms with the abyss, their own experience with the Holocaust."[111] Its positive, joyous conclusion allows them to affirm life, and more fully participate in the celebratory spirit of Purim.

---

[108] Epstein, "Drama on the Table," 213.
[109] Ibid., 213-214.
[110] See chapter 4, which discusses the unrestrained atmosphere during the Bobover purimshpiel.
[111] Epstein, "The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl," 237, 252.

CHAPTER 3:

FOOD AND GIFTS:
MISHLO'ACH MANOT AND *TZEDAKAH*

Although it is just one of the four required mitzvot, reading *Megillat Esther* is the most central component of Purim. Two of the remaining three pertain to giving. *Megillat Esther* teaches:

> יְמֵי מִשְׁתֶּה וְשִׂמְחָה, וּמִשְׁלֹחַ מָנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ, וּמַתָּנוֹת לָאֶבְיוֹנִים.
> Observe [these days] as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts (*mishlo'ach manot*) to one another and presents (*matanot*) to people who are poor (*la'ev'yonim*).[112]

From this verse, we learn that we must give not only to our friends but also to all people who are in need. Megillah 7a explains the differences between these two types of generosity:

> ומשלח מנות איש לרעהו - שתי מנות לאיש אחד. ומתנות לאבינים - שתי מתנות לשני בני אדם.
> "And gifts to one another" Rav Yoseph taught in a Baraita that the Megillah (9:22) states "And sending portions to one another." This entails two portions to one man. The Megillah continues "and gifts to poor people" entails two gifts to two people.

Since *mishlo'ach manot* is a plural term, we must send two items to a single person in order to fulfill our obligation of sending gifts to our friends. Since *l'evyonim* is plural in *Megillat Esther*, we must give gifts to more than one poor person. One gift for each of two people suffices.

It is easy to be generous with our friends, and far more difficult to think about those who are most in need. Rambam explains, however:

---

[112] *Megillat Esther* 9:22b

> מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו, שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים.
>
> It is preferable for a person to be more liberal with his donations to poor people than to be lavish in his [preparation of the Purim] feast or in sending portions to his friends. There is no greater and more splendid happiness than to gladden the hearts of poor people, the orphans, the widows, and the people who converted to Judaism.[113]

It is far more important that we give to people who are in need than that we give to those we are most accustomed to giving. Rambam goes so far as to say that we are not permitted to say no to anyone who is in need:

> ואין מדקדקין במעות פורים אלא כל הפושט ידו ליטול נותנין לו.
>
> We should not be discriminating [in selecting the recipients of these Purim gifts]. Instead, one should give to whoever stretches out his hand.[114]

Furthermore, everyone in the community has the obligation to give, including the poorest Israelite who lives off of the generosity of others, and the mourner who is usually exempted from positive time-bound commandments that may interrupt the obligation of mourning a recent death.[115] This is reminiscent of the obligation each member of society had to donate a half shekel to the Temple treasury during the month of Adar. Rich or poor, each person gave equally, signifying the equality between Israelites regardless of their circumstances.[116] In essence, the act of giving equalizes the community. Not only

---

[113] Moses Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah Hilchot Megillah* 2:17; in addition to people who were poor, orphans, widows and converts were on the margins of society. Giving to them stressed the importance of giving to everyone within a community.
[114] Moses Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah Hilchot Megillah* 2:16
[115] Solomon Ganzfried, *Code of Jewish Law (Kizur Shulhan Aruk)*, trans. Hyman E. Goldin, vol 3 (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1927), 115-121.
[116] Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, 118-119.

are all required to give, but in addition, these gifts of prepared food enable everyone—rich and poor alike—to participate in a joyous Purim feast. [117]

Anonymity furthers a sense of equivalence. In *Megillat Esther*, Mordecai dresses up in Kings' robes twice, and Esther dresses up to meet the king.[118] Performers of early purimshpiels picked up on this theme and wore costumes, enabling them to conceal their identities while asking for donations. Similarly, poor people disguised themselves so that they need not be embarrassed when requesting and receiving charity.[119]

All of these factors encourage a sense of community togetherness and responsibility. Moses of Kobrin, a nineteenth-century rabbi, remarked that giving Purim gifts to friends and disadvantaged people was "the best way to strike at Haman."[120] In the story of Esther, Jews came together and fasted as one community. Through a unity of care and concern for one another, we can save ourselves from the Hamans of any age.

J. J. Cohen's story (chapter 1, above) about how a group of concentration camp detainees came together speaks to this end.[121] Although the men of the camp had previously fought over the small amount of food they possessed, the Purim spirit endowed them with generosity. Together they read the story of Esther, and then offered one another their scraps of saved food, in the spirit of *mishlo'ach manot*. For a few moments they were able to come together as a single People, and restore their humanity in the face of forces utterly inhumane.

---

[117] Baba Metziah 78b requires us to give food to poor people prior to the Purim festival. As *Mishnah Torah*, *Hilchot Megillah* 2:15 explains, food gifts should include pastries and prepared meals that can be eaten immediately. This way, everyone, regardless of their assets, can eat a festive meal.
[118] *Megillat Esther* 8:15, 8:17
[119] Shmuel Pinchas Gelbard, *Rite and Reason: 1050 Jewish Customs and Their Sources*, trans. Rabbi Nachman Bulman (Israel: Mifal Rashi Publishing, 1995), 455.
[120] Kleinman, M.S., *Or Yesharim*, Piotrrkov, 1924, in *The Hasidic Anthology: Tales and Teachings of the Hasidim*, by Louis I Newman (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 361.
[121] Ibid., 22.

Solly Garnor tells a similar story of her experience in Dachau. There was a man that everyone called "Chaim the rabbi," because of the conscientiousness with which he prayed and followed the Jewish calendar. When the Germans were not paying attention he invited people to join him for evening prayers. One Sunday morning, the people in the ghetto returned to their barracks after a small breakfast. People excitedly spoke about the rumors of American forces arriving in Germany when Chaim the rabbi, wearing a paper crown and a blanket, began shouting "Haman to the gallows! Haman to the gallows!" Ganor explains: "We stood…petrified before this strange apparition, barely able to trust our eyes, while he performed a dance in the snow, singing: 'I am Achashwerosh, Achashwerosh, the king of the Persians.' Then he stood sill straightened himself out, chin pointed to the sky, his right arm extended in an imperial gesture and shouted: 'Haman to the gallows! Haman to the gallows! And when I say Haman to the gallows, we all know which Haman we are talking about!'" Everyone thought that he had gone crazy, when he shouted "Fellow Jews, what is the matter with you? Today is Purim, let us play a Purim Shpiel!" Ganor had forgotten about Purim; most of the other inmates had, as well. Thanks to the rabbi, they were able to celebrate, reenacting a purimshpiel for onlookers in the heart of Dachau.

The rabbi promised them that they would receive *mishlo'ach manot*, though no one believed him. Miraculously and for the first time, the delegation from International Red Cross came to the camp that very afternoon, with gifts in hand. They gave each prisoner condensed milk, chocolate, sugar and cigarettes. As Ganor explains, "It is impossible to describe our joy. Here we were starving to death and suddenly on Purim, we received these heavenly gifts. Since then we never doubted the 'rabbi' anymore." The

gifts from the Red Cross were nothing short of miraculous for the Jews of Dachau, giving them unprecedented hope that even their current "Haman-Hitler" would soon go to the gallows, meeting his end. The American army would rescue those who had survived the camp, and they truly would be able to celebrate Purim in their own age.[122] More than food, *mishlo'ach manot* embodies layers of symbolic meaning. The offerings of *mishlo'ach manot* gifts enables every member of a society to participate in the miraculous and redemptive Purim atmosphere through joyful eating. Food brings family members and friends together. Destinctively Purim recipes and delicacies create Jewish memories that unite families and the greater Jewish community. Hamentashen, homemade matzo ball soup and fresh latkas are familiar Askenazi favorites. Less well known is the Ukrainian honey loaf called *malkhes breytl*, or an Eastern Euopean twisted challah called *koyletsh*.[123] In the midst of the ghetto such opportunities were nonexistent. But J. J. Cohen and Solly Ganor's descriptions of Purim provide the miracle of food itself—any food—when nourishment was largely unavailable.

Beyond the extreme conditions of the ghetto, these gifts still function as a means to unite people—albeit in a different way. They speak to the mutuality joining giver and receiver in through a system of reciprocity. Wealth, gender, age, and social status determine the gifts content. Megillah 7a-7b recalls several incidents of Purim gift giving:

> רבי יהודה נשיאה שדר ליה לרבי אושעיא אטמא דעיגלא תלתא וגרבא דחמרא,
> שלח ליה קיימת בנו רבינו ומשלח מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאבינים. רבה
> שדר ליה למרי בר מר ביד אביי מלא טסקא דקשבא, ומלי כסא קמחא
> דאבשונא. אמר ליה אביי: השתא אמר מרי: אי חקלאה מלכא ליהוי ־ דיקולא

[122] Solly Ganor, "Bearing Witness: A Purim Story from the Holocaust, Purim in Dachau," March 18, 2005 http://www.chgs.umn.edu/histories/documentary/ganorBearingwitness.pdf.
[123] *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979), 33-34.

> מצואריה לא נחית. הדר שדר ליה איהו מלא טסקא דזנגבילא, ומלא כסא דפלפלתא אריכא. אמר אביי: השתא אמר מר: אנא שדרי ליה חוליא ואיהו שדר לי חורפא.
>
> Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi sent to Rabbi Osha'aya the thigh portion from a three year old calf,[124] and a flask of wine. [Rabbi Osha'aya] sent [this message] to him: Our teacher, you have fulfilled both [mitzvot] "sending *mishlo'ach manot* to your fellow" and "gifts to poor people."[125] Rabba sent to Mari Bar Mar, by the hand of Abaye, a basketful of dates and a cupful of flour [made from] roasted wheat. Abaye said to [Rabba]: Now, Mari will say "If a peasant becomes a king, doesn't he take the basket from his shoulders?"[126] [Mari] sent back [to Rabba] a basketful of ginger and a cupful of long peppers. Abaye said [to Mari]: Now, master [Rabba] will say "I sent him sweets and he sends me bitter [food]!"

Through concrete examples, this text highlights the complicated system of what is acceptable to offer as *mishlo'ach manot*. We learn from Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi's gift that it is acceptable—and perhaps even preferable to be generous. Desirable meat and a flask of wine is a more bountiful portion than included in most *mishlo'ach manot*. Giving it could be seen as a mark of respect to the recipient, Rabbi Osha'aya. This fulfilled Rabbi Yehudah's commitment without question.

On the other hand, Rabba's package to Mari Bar Mar did not live up to standards, according to Abaye. While a peasant's *mishlo'ach manot* of dates and flour may be an act of generosity, a person of higher class was expected to give more because he has more. Mari repaid Rabba's insult with bitter food for a sweet and celebratory holiday. While technically they fulfilled the commandment of *mishlo'ach manot*, they did not do so in the spirit of giving, or community togetherness. Such parsimony defeats the point.

---

[124] It is unclear as to whether this is a 3 year old calf or a third-born calf. Either way, the term refers to a particularly desirable portion.

[125] We can deduce from this that Rabbi Osha'aya was both a friend of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and a poor man, thus fulfilling both mitzvot. Alternatively, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi had already fulfilled his commandment of giving to poor people. With this gift, both of his obligations to give had been fulfilled.

[126] He explained that when a person is elevated to a higher position, his actions should also become elevated; Rabba had become the head of Pumbedita, but was still sending ordinary gifts for Purim. This was not acceptable.

Today's Chasidic communities maintain such stringent systems of giving. An intricate system of rules and obligations creates excess meaning, according to Amy Shuman. This meaning "converts material goods into symbolic goods and reciprocal relationships into social categories of persons."[127] *Mishlo'ach manot* become opportunities to negotiate relationships and economic politics.

Shuman describes two types of Purim giving: charitable and relational. The community gives money anonymously and collectively to the poorer members of society. They send the social, relationship-building *mishlo'ach manot* with notes from the family. The food itself is often not appreciated. Made up of largely pastries and other specialties, these gifts are not necessary. They actually create anxiety, as women worry about preparing their homes for Passover, which will begin in a few weeks time. As a result, families often recycle their gifts, allowing food to float from home to home in the form of *mishlo'ach manot*.

Remarkably, these communities of people who diligently monitor their food every other day of the year turn a blind eye when it comes to Purim gifts. They have no idea whence the food originally comes, yet they accept it, and even offer it to others as gifts. Shuman explains, "Insofar as the gift exchange is about social relationship, it reproduces central cultural premises about the movement of goods in the community, and these premises are so important that they prevail over the requirement to monitor food"[128] Far more important than any food item is the way in which food is used on Purim to bring the community together, tearing down the boundaries of diligence in matters of kashrut, and pushing people to be generous with one another.

---

[127] Shuman, Amy "Food Gifts: Ritual Exchange and the Production of Excess Meaning," *Journal of American Folklore* 113 (450), 495.
[128] Ibid., 498-503.

When Purim comes to an end, food gifts lose their value—as food. Anxious to get rid of them, working members of the family bring them to non-Jewish colleagues the next day. The value of the gifts remains in the form of relationships that have been honored or negotiated, and the obligations fulfilled within the community.[129]

Megillat Esther tells the story of a time when Haman nearly tore the Jewish People apart, bringing them to their destruction. As is evidenced in J. J. Cohen's memoir, survivalist instincts during the Holocaust pushed camp inmates to fight over small morsels of food, destroying positive connections among them. By contrast, even in the camps, Purim giving, in the form of *matanot l'evyonim*—gifts to poor people—bring people together. The same phenomenon of uniting people through giving occurs through *mishlo'ach manot*—even in more normal circumstances. Through *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot l'evyonim*, we send a clear message that although people have tried to destroy us, we stand stronger and more united than ever. In that way, as Moses of Kobrin says, we strike at the Hamans of every age.

[129] Ibid., 506-507.

CHAPTER 4:

PRANKS AND CARNIVAL HUMOR

Focusing on the Torah commandments "You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek,"[130] and "The name of the wicked shall rot,"[131] Jews at Purim celebrate in the downfall of their enemy. This callousness may seem counter to the Jewish tradition, which professes each person's likeness with God[132] and teaches "love your neighbor as yourself."[133] In the Torah, when the Israelites marched on dry land after escaping from the bondage in Egypt, they saw the waters of the Red Sea engulf their Egyptian enemies. Immediately the Israelites erupted into song, rejoicing in their victory. According to Megillah 10b, when the angels began to sing in celebration, God reproached them saying, "My children are drowning and you sing songs to me!" God permitted the Israelites to sing in joy; their lives had been saved. The angels, whose lives had never been in danger, were prohibited from rejoicing in the suffering of others.

On Purim, we retell a story of near Jewish annihilation. In some ways, like the Israelites, our lives were in danger and we were at risk. Similarly, we learn at each Passover Seder that it is as if we were freed from the land of Egypt. Nonetheless, we remove one drop of wine for every plague the Israelites suffered so as to refrain from celebrating in the Egyptians' hardship. Although these stories are our stories, the immediate danger has passed. Unlike on Passover, however, Purim encourages us to rejoice in the defeat of our enemies. During centuries of living under hostile leadership,

---

[130] Deuteronomy 25:19
[131] Proverbs 10:7
[132] Genesis 1:27
[133] Leviticus 19:18

Purim gave Jews a way to express their emotions of hostility, anger, and hope that the Hamans of their own day would meet the fate of the Haman in *Megillat Esther*. In this spirit, Jews allowed themselves to throw aside the rigid disciplines that guided their life in favor of a carefree and celebratory festival.[134]

Such an escape valve was necessary because traditional Jewish communities have depended on an intricately designed legal system to govern the lives of its members. Jewish life was determined, restricted, prescribed and proscribed down to the smallest detail. Purim became a rare and essential opportunity for release from this strict, rules-oriented way of life, allowing Jews to participate in a bawdy holiday of uninhibited joy and reckless abandon.

That attitude was a natural expansion of the practices we looked at in Chapter Two. We saw there the ways in which hostility entered the Megillah reading as early as the ninth-century, when adults and children alike began to noisily blot out Haman's name through stamping, knocking together pieces of wood, clapping hands, and using groggers. Some communities, such as the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue of London and congregations in Kalwaria, Poland felt so uncomfortable with these practices that they banned the use of groggers in their synagogues during the late 1700s.[135] Others found great meaning in them. Abraham Sinchah Sachs explains that when he was a child it was customary "to add Jew-baiters, past and present, to the Haman family."[136] This kept the meaning of Purim contemporary, allowing Jews to air their grievances through the Megillah. Shmarya Levin found power in blotting out Haman's name as a child:

---

[134] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, 321.
[135] *Purim: The Face and the Mask*, 31.
[136] Abraham Sinchah Sachs, *Worlds That Passed* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928), 232. Also see Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 83.

> "Children as we were, we knew well that Haman was not in our synagogue…But we understood the symbolism instinctively. There were Hamans everywhere, great enemies and little enemies of the Jews. And we took revenge for the evil they had done us and the evil they contemplated…We felt that these blows of ours, delivered in the air, were not without effect. In one way or another, the Hamans of the world felt the noisy onslaught in their bones. And we were filled with contentment. We had done something to get even with the enemies of the Jewish People."[137]

For Levin, noisy outbursts were marks of revenge over cruel enemies of the Jews throughout time. Outside of this ritual, there was little Jewish children, in particular, could do. During the Megillah reading, however, they were empowered to take out their aggressions by smiting those who sought their destruction.

This sentiment carried to the kitchen, as Jewish mothers created dishes in the Purim spirit. There was a custom among Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jews to consume enemies by eating a variety of culinary concoctions reminiscent of Purim villains in the Megillah. They ate cookies marked with the names of Vashti and Haman's wife, Zeresh. Jews of Morocco ate a Purim bread, which was decorated with boiled eggs that are later plucked out as a symbolic way of taking revenge on Haman. In Rabbi Jacob Breuer's German Jewish community they pickled meat and hung it, evocative of the hanging of Haman and his sons at the end of the Megillah. Kreplach, which are also eaten on *erev* Yom Kippur and *Hosh'ana Rabbah,* became a popular Purim dish. These small dumplings filled with ground meat are typically eaten on days associated with a "beating."[138] On Yom Kippur, Jews self-flagellate in remorse for wrong doings over the past year. On *Hosh'ana Rabbah*, Jews beat the willow branches, symbolizing the

---

[137] Shmarya Levin, *Childhood in Exile*, trans. Maurice Samuel (New Jersey: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929), 137-160.

[138] This concept derived from the biblical phrase "הכה תכה" - interpreted to mean "On the days of Hoshana, Atonement and Haman, you shall eat many Kreplah" by means of this expression: הושענא, כפור, המן, תאכלו כרעפליך הרבה.

elimination of sin. On Purim, Jews symbolically "beat Haman" when his name is mentioned in the Megillah. Similar to Kreplach, the Jews of Italy ate *Orecchi di Aman*, "Haman's ears." These three-cornered dough pockets containing chopped meat date back at least to the fourteenth-century. According to poet and satirist of the time Emanuel Haromi (1260-1335), this custom may come from both reality and a folktale. Italian law in his time punished criminals by cutting off their ears. The folktale claims that the Jews cut of Haman's ears upon deliverance as an act of revenge. Another popular treat, Hamentashen, are reminiscent of Haman's three-cornered-Hat, or alternatively, serve as a reminder for the three patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who, the Rabbis credit as being responsible for Haman's downfall. It has been taught that the word Hamantashen comes from *Haman* and *tach*, which means "to be weakened." This implies that eating these three-cornered pastries weakens Haman in some way. In all of these cases, consuming enemies can be understood as a type of "sympathetic magic," through which Jews can strike back at their enemies.[139]

During the Holocaust especially, Jews took this message to heart. *The Purim Anthology* tells a story about a Jewish man who mocked Hitler during one of famous speeches. At the end of the event, Hitler approached this man, who immediately admitted to being a Jew. Hitler replied. "Then you should be taking my address more seriously. Do you not believe that I will fulfill my threats to bring about the destruction of the Jews?" To this the man replied that Hitler was not the first anti-Semite seeking to destroy the Jewish People. Pharaoh once tried, and now the Jews celebrate Passover and eat Matzah to celebrate their redemption. Haman once tried, and now Jews celebrate Purim and eat tasty Hamentashen to celebrate his downfall. "While listening to your venomous

[139] *Purim: The Face and the Mask*, 33-34.

diatribe," he explained, "I wondered what kind of delicacy the Jews would invent and what kind of holiday would they establish to celebrate your downfall."[140]

In addition to blotting out Haman's name and consuming enemies, Jews took up a more literal practice of "beating" one's enemy. In the late fourteenth to early fifteenth-century, German Talmudist Jacob ben Moses Moelin (Maharil) isolated the verse וְהָיָה אִם-בֵּן הַכּוֹת, הָרָשָׁע. - "Then it shall be, if the wicked man deserves to be beaten."[141] Maharil pointed out that the last letters of the first three words of this verse spell out המן- Haman's name, implying that Haman should be beaten. The popularity around beating and burning Haman in effigy stemmed from this understanding, he explained.[142]

By this time, burning Haman in effigy had become a well established custom. Louis Ginzberg confirmed this early Purim prank from a Geonic Responsum found in the Cairo Geniza, which explained that men made an image of Haman four or five days before the holiday and hung it on the roof. On Purim they built a bonfire, and threw this effigy inside as they stood around, dancing and singing. They held a hoop above the fire, waving it from side to side. It is possible that the hoop held the effigy.[143] It is also possible that the hoop did not hold the image of Haman at all, but was instead used by young men to swing over the bonfire in joy.[144] Sanhedrin 64 mentions such a ring, which Rashi explains children used on Purim to jump over a hole in the earth which contained a live bonfire.

---

[140] Philip Goodman, "The Purim to Come," in *The Purim Anthology* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 384-5.
[141] Deuteronomy 25:2
[142] See Jacob ben Moses Moelin, *Minhagim*
[143] Louis Ginzberg, *Geonica*, Vol 2 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1909), 1-2.
[144] Israel Davidson, *Parody in Jewish Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1907), 21.

From here, various similar customs emerged. In Italy, the custom of burning Haman in effigy was called *Ira*, which is Italian for vengeance.[145] In addition, fathers and sons conducted sports tournaments, in which the boys fought on foot, using nuts as pellets while their dads went through the streets on horseback with wooden staves, blasting horns and bugles "as an effigy representing Haman, which was subsequently burnt on a mock pyre."[146]

In Frankfort-on-the-Main during the eighteenth-century, people made a house of wax complete with wax figures of Haman, wife Zeresh and guards. In full view of the congregation, the whole scene was set ablaze. Nineteenth-century Russian Jewish traveler Joseph Judah Corney spoke of the Jews of The Causasus who burned Haman in effigy privately. The wife prepares a piece of wood; the husband comes home to it asking what it is. When the wife says "Haman" the man screams at her to burn it. They kick it and throw it in the fire to burn[147] Kalonymos ben Kalonymous of thirteenth-century Provence recounts people riding through the streets holding branches and blowing trumpets around a Haman puppet, which would be raised and then burned. The custom of hanging or burning Haman in effigy is still observed in Persia, and remote communities of Kurdistan.[148]

This gaiety went a step further as Jews began to involve people, instead of puppets, in these violent rituals. Sachs explains that even when he was a child, in the late 1800s, the butchers' son would dress up as Haman, allowing others to take out their aggression on him. "Each and every one of us would take it out on Haman, one with a

---

[145] Goodman, *Purim Anthology*, 213, 323.
[146] Abrahams, Israel, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (London: Jewish Publication Society, 1932), 402.
[147] Ibid., 323.
[148] Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition*, 66-67.

good dig another with a wallop; this one would pinch him, another would spit at him; everybody considered it a mizvah to inflict all kinds of torture on Haman."[149] In eighteenth-century Poland, Jews believed that the inversions of the prevailing power structure in the book of Esther gave them permission to punish non-Jews. They paid a Christian to dress up like Haman and suffer abuse.[150]

Under no other circumstances would these violent tendencies be tolerated – and the infractions do not end there. Other practices that the rabbis would normally frown upon were accepted on Purim, including stealing food Terumat HaDeshen 106 stipulates "Every dish that the boys take from one another, even without permission, for the purpose of rejoicing on Purim, from the hour of reading the Megillah until the Purim meal, is not considered a theft or a robbery and they are not subject to the jurisdiction of the court." In Eastern Europe there is a tradition of snatching food and hitting one another. As Monford Harris explains, "The legal codes are of the opinion that these actions do not constitute a violation of the prohibition against stealing and assault. Strange as it may seem, such actions are rooted in the scroll. They, too, serve to structure the holiday as topsy-turvy." [151] Although the Jews of Persia did not take the spoil from their enemies, in the Saul-Agag conflict read during the Shabbat prior to Purim, the children of Israel did take the valuables of the Agagites, who are understood to be Haman's predecessors. This reasoning gave Jews the permission to steal.

---

[149] Sachs, *Worlds That Passed*, 231

[150] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 257. It is important to note that Christian clergy quickly understood the meaning of this practice, and forbade it in 1739. Jewish authorities soon discouraged it as well.

[151] Harris "Purim," 166.

In addition, Megillah 7b commands Jews to drink until they cannot distinguish between "cursed be Haman" and "blessed be Mordecai."[152] While drunk, people are disoriented, and it is impossible for them to act with the same level of responsibility and respect that they would sober. Some law codes therefore absolve people of responsibility for their actions while drunk on Purim. According to Moses Isserles, a drunk man on Purim does not have to pay damages if he injures his neighbor because of an excess of Purim joy.[153] Stealing too is deemed permissible in this instance, and the robber is not held responsible for any damages. Fifteenth-century rabbi Judah Minz noted that many rabbis of the day ruled "that any food stolen in the couse of Purim joy, even without permission…is not considered thievery." Gambling was permitted only during Hanukkah and Purim, and in Kurdistan men and women would eat together on Purim—something that would never otherwise be allowed.[154]

Not everyone was pleased with this scenario. Isaiah Horowitz of the seventeenth-century complained that on Purim "every man is permitted to cast off the yoke of Torah and the commandments, and the more crazy one becomes, the better it is. But all this is undoubtedly evil and unfortunate and a flagrant sin."[155]

The custom of wearing Purim costumes and masks made it even easier for people to get away with their actions. By the fifteenth century, masquerading became an important Purim tradition, inspired by the Italian masked entertainers of the *commedia dell'arte*.[156] Scholars found justification for this practice in Hullin 13b, which reads "Where is (the name) Esther found in the Torah? It is written 'And I will surely hide

---

[152] Megillah 7b
[153] Moses Isserles on *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 695:2
[154] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 265-266.
[155] Ibid., 266.
[156] Marks,Gil, *Olive Trees and Honey* (New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2005) , 35.

(*hastir astir*) My face from you'"[157] This Talmudic exegesis became the topic of many Halachic disputes. Moses Isserles of the sixteenth century and even Judah Levi Minz from a century before – the same Judah Minz who pointed out that stealing on Purim should not be considered thievery – agreed that masquerades were desirable because they promoted a free and joyous spirit. Others, however, including Samuel Aboab and Josel Sirkes of the seventeenth-century, opposed masquerading, since it broke the yolk of tradition, allowing men and women to cross-dress, mix fabrics, and fashion graven images.[158] Additionally, people wore masks to conceal their identities, out of shame for their dress, tricks and lewd behavior on Purim. Masks helped them to avoid being recognized by neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. They could do whatever they wished without fear of repercussions.[159]

Some communities reacted to the disorder masks caused by enforcing restrictions. On April 17, 1750, Fredrick the Great of Prussia ruled that Jews "must refrain from all improper excesses in their festivals, particularly during the so-called Haman or Purim festival" for the purpose of "protection" of Jews in observing their holiday.[160] Prussian barons did not appreciate the hilarity of Purim because it deteriorated into fighting. As a result, the Baron of Sugenheim ruled in 1756 that "no one shall dare mask himself or run around in clown's garb or with candles and torches on Purim, under penalty of a florin to be paid the civil authorities."[161] Similarly, Grand Duke Carl Friedrich of Saxe-Weimar put many regulations in place on June 10, 1823, including one forbidding Jews from

---

[157] Deuteronomy 31:18
[158] *Purim: The Face and the Mask*, 43.
[159] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, 327.
[160] Ibid., 327; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World* (Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938),84, 94-5.
[161] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, 328; Marcus, *The Jew in the Medieval World*, 212-3.

"Haman beating" on Purim.[162] Jewish leadership, too, "in various times and places…attempted to restrain the wild Purim celebrations, ban the offensive humor of the play, and institute decorum." They wished to uphold the commandments over all other practices. But, "Despite opposition of this nature," says Jeffrey Rubenstein, "Purim eventually triumphed."[163]

Purim turns the communities' rules on their heads. Norms break down, and people begin to experiment with reality. According to Victor Turner, this represents a kind of anti-structure, in which no order exists. People discard rules haphazardly during this state of liminality.[164] Jeffery Rubenstein disagrees, arguing that Turner's model is oversimplified. "Reversals may occur among particular elements of the structure but stop short of complete inversion," since "other pillars of the social structure remain in force." Purim attacks the structure of law at its edges, though overall system remains present. Although women and men cross-dress, for example, they do not pray together or serve the same roles in their communities.[165]

Throughout time, this "alternative structure" has taken a myriad of forms, including parody. As Rubenstein explains, parody is a natural Jewish expression for this overturning of power for two reasons: 1) Judaism is highly literary, interpreting and reinterpreting texts. Parody is an interpretation, or midrash of reality. 2) Power existed outside the Jewish community. Though Jews could not obtain power from these outside sources, they could overthrow the power within the Jewish community, by mocking,

---

[162] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology,* 328; David Phillipson, *The Reform Movement in Judaism* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), 35.
[163] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 275.
[164] Ibid., 270. See Turner, Victor *From Ritual to Theatre*, 41-50.
[165] Ibid., 273.

through parody, those who were more powerful because of wealth, lineage or education.[166]

Parody took a number of forms. Purim costumes and masks allowed children, of naturally inferior status, to threaten adults symbolically. Adults had to tolerate their wild behavior, including their insults, criticism, and demands. Beginning in medieval Provence, the Jewish community elected a Purim King. This King had no real power: he served as a jester, in hopes of furthering the merriment of Purim.[167] This idea of the Purim King continued in a yeshivah setting, where students replaced the rabbis. In the yeshivot of Telz and Voloshin, for example, students elected a Purim rabbi who became King of the Yeshivah. Wearing a long silk coat, a girdle, a fur-lined cap and fake facial hair imitating that of the rabbi or head of the Yeshivah, this boy would offer the day's lesson as the head of the yeshivah sat at the table, like all of the other students. His lesson was "a burlesque" on the yeshivah's daily regime, mocking the head of the yeshivah as a means of showing him in what regard his pupils truly held him. Occasionally, he was forced to listen to sharp criticism of himself, with no choice but to grin and bear it.[168] Similarly, during the first Shabbat after Purim in Worms, young men wore special clothing, sat in the seats of elders and teachers and conducted services while mocking the people who normally sat there as well as the structure of the service itself. They purposefully mixed up the service's order in order to create confusion. This reversal

---

[166] Ibid., 271-272.
[167] Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition*, 66; Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 253.
[168] Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, 52.

allowed students to transcend their normal submissive roles and become critics through ridicule that was, at times, so extreme that it caused great embarrassment.[169]

The Displaced Persons Center in Landsberg, Germany

"Alternative structures" became increasingly poignant during times of pain and controversy. In 1946, the Displaced Persons Center of Landsberg became a breeding ground for its own creations of carnivalesque behavior. The object of the mockery was not other Jews, but the Nazi regime which had overpowered and victimized them. Newly liberated, they parodied the Nazis with public displays against Hitler, and celebration in the defeat of their enemy.

Art took a prominent role, as people competed for the most intricate and ingenious displays against Hitler. Boris Blum, a former inmate at Majdanek, explained that he woke up the morning of Purim with tears in his eyes. The Landsberg Jewish Center had been decorated thoroughly, with Israeli flags, slogans, signs, and caricatures. The community paper, *Landsberger Lager-Cajtung*, wrote about the displays in vivid detail. At the entrance was a likeness of Hitler holding *Mein Kampf* and adorned with medals. A lion with an American flag held a stick in its jaws, with Hitler dangling from one end and a swastika from the other. On top of this image, a concentration camp inmate held in one hand a sign reading "The People of Israel lives," and in the other hand, a Red-Cross package. Hitlers were hung everywhere -- big, fat, and small; with and without medals; hung by the head, the feet or the belly. Tombstones displayed the inscription "P.M. (*po nikbar*), here lies Hitler; may his name be blotted out"[170] They hanged Haman

[169] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 254-257.
[170] Blum-Dobkin, "The Landsberg Carnival," 55.

in effigy, serving "not only a parallel to the hanging of Haman, but a reversal of the Nazi murder of the Jews, which had itself been a brutal reversal of the hanging Haman." As Boris Blum's wife, Frania, explains, the carnival "was like Hitler's funeral. We knew that Hitler was dead, but we didn't see where he was…Here we saw that he was being buried, and he was executed."[171]

People dressed up as Hitler, including a man named Berek Gold. Everyone wished to see him and take his picture, including the police. Others dressed up as SS officers. As Boris Blum explained, "In the concentration camps…the whole idea was only to live to see Hitler's defeat. And what greater satisfaction can there be than to be at a parade, a Purim carnival, in Germany, in Landsberg, in the place where Hitler wrote *Mein Kampf*!"[172] The carnival had no beginning or end, instead erupting into several improvised celebrations surrounding the planned ones.

At seven o'clock in the evening, Jews gathered for another public display against Hitler: the symbolic burning of *Mein Kampf*. The *Landsberger Lager-Cajtung* read, "The flames, which licked at the black night sky, carried far, far, over mountains and seas, this tiding: *Am Yisroel Chai*! Jews live on, will live! Hitler, may his name and memory be blotted out, has lost his '*kampf*,' his battle, and we Jews, although we have paid dearly have won the battle. So Haman ended, so Hitler ended, so will end all enemies of the Jews."[173]

The carnivalesque atmosphere of the Landsberg Purim celebration allowed Jews to recognize their freedom in a way they had not yet been able. As welfare director of the camp, Leo Srole, remarked, this was a day "of such elation, I have never seen anything

[171] Ibid., 57-58.
[172] Ibid., 52-57.
[173] Ibid., 57.

like it.…Hitler and Haman now had their due…it was really a joyous celebration in the midst of all the grim bleakness of that camp"[174] Jews finally had a productive outlet through which to vent, and begin to take in the reversal of their experiences. Once Jews were murdered; now they celebrated as Haman was symbolically hanged and buried, and Mein Kampf was burned in the town from whence it came. Whereas Jews were once imprisoned, now some of their captors served sentences in Nuremberg, nearby. Jews were once forced from their homes, and now they resolved to build a new homeland.[175] The intensity of these reversals could not be contained in reading of *Megillat Esther* alone. After years of suppressed hardship and torture, the Jews of the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center needed this opportunity to grieve, to mock, to take symbolic revenge, and to rebuild. Purim's carnivalesque tendency was the perfect venue.

Bobover Community

Purim's carnivalesque atmosphere presents itself differently for the Bobover community of Borough Park, Brooklyn. The day begins as people frantically buy last-minute items in preparation for their feasts. Children deliver *mishlo'ach manot*. As Shifra Epstein explains, "By noon young children, as well as yeshiva students and some adults, can be dressed in original or store-bought costumes, mingling in the street." They dress as modern-day Arab Hamans; Hasidic Mordecais; Esthers, clothed in contemporary bridal

[174] Ibid., 57.
[175] Ibid., 57-58.

gowns; and as rebbes, in false beards, and robes. In the afternoon, Jews take in street performances with a political bent.[176]

Purim's true spectacle begins in the evening, as Jews gather for the purimshpiel. Although the play itself contains layers of meaning, the purimshpiel consists of far more than what happens on the stage. The audience, itself, is the spectacle, as people continuously trickle in for a performance that routinely begins after midnight. Men and women drag benches into the viewing area, as they struggle to secure a good viewing position. Sometimes the first tier of benches collapses, causing the other tiers to fall. When this happens "people tumble down with such commotion and disorder that they cause the performance to stop." Some stand on ladders, balance on window sills, hang from the ceiling after removing acoustical tiles, or stand on inverted garbage cans and on water fountains. People fall easily, and any attempt to keep or secure a viewing area can result in a chain reaction, destroying all decorum in the audience. When this happens, the rebbe's assistants may try to restore order by pointing a cane at the trouble area. When this doesn't work, they confiscate and throw the troublemaker's hat, so that he must leave to retrieve it, restoring decorum.[177]

The audience can become violent. Epstein explains that in 1977, when she received permission to film the purimshpiel, she and the camera people were forced to fight for their spots. Just a few minutes into the purimshpiel, members of the community gave one camera woman a large enough push that she lost her spot, and her camera broke. Another fell from a ladder, and a Hasid stole his camera from him by the time he

---

[176] Epstein, Shifra "From Tel Aviv to Borough Park: Purim in the Twentieth Century," *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum* (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979), 49.
[177] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 203-4.

got up.[178] In addition to violence that breaks out among audience members, the rebbe's assistants often lose their temper, and are permitted to strike people with a cane. At times, this beating can draw blood.[179]

When men block a woman's view, she often reverses her social behavior, allowing herself to aggressively reproach her male counterparts. She may scream at them to sit, take off their hats, or move. At times, despite her allegiance to being *shomer negiah*,[180] she may touch or push a man as an indication that he should sit. Nonetheless, Epstein explains that "While the occasion provides women with a unique opportunity to chide the men and to dispense with the *mikhitse*, the exchange itself contributes to a communal feeling of *haimishkait* (homeliness) and increases camaraderie within the group."[181] Violence and aggression would not otherwise be tolerated, but the purimshpiel is abnormal: it is "the only occasion during the year which is almost completely dedicated to disorder. Their world is temporarily inverted: married men become actors and wear costumes; the members of the *besmedresh*, now the audience view a play on this one and only occasion of the year; the division between male and female is relaxed and women chide men and draw aside the *mikhitse.*"[182]

These inversions of otherwise strict observances are so beyond the norm for the Bobover community that they constitute as carnivalesque. Much like the community in Landsberg's Displaced Person's Center, the Bobovers define themselves as survivors. Purim gives them a much needed opportunity to defy authority and voice their anger and

---

[178] Epstein, "Going Far Away," 208.
[179] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 204.
[180] Jews who are *shomer negiah* refrain from any physical contact with people of the opposite sex to whom they are not related.
[181] Epstein, "Drama on a Table," 204-205.
[182] Ibid., 198-199.

hostility to the Nazis, and to Hamans in every age. They do this not only through the purimshpiel itself, but through the disorder in which they participate in the audience.

Why is the carnivalesque so important?

From the Nazi concentration camps and ghettos to the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center and the Bobover community of Brooklyn, the carnivalesque play an important role in Purim celebrations. In each case, participants are encouraged to step outside of their behavioral expectations. Stealing, violent actions, and overt aggression are accepted as an important component of Purim, though otherwise this conduct would be considered inappropriate and worthy of retribution.

As a twenty-first century Jew who has thus far been fortunate to avoid blatant anti-Semitism, it is difficult for me to understand why these actions are accepted. Why is it ever okay to demonstrate hatred and immoral behavior? It is nonetheless apparent that Jews living through unspeakable horrors such as those of the Holocaust found comfort, a sense of community, and perhaps even an opportunity to heal in these carnivalesque practices. There are many theories as to why. Joseph Boskin, Joseph Dorinson and Terrence Des Pres believe that humor can be healing in a way nothing else can. Monford Harris believes that the key lies in Purim's element of "play time," which allows Jews to connect and reflect on their lives. Jeffrey Rubenstein argues that Purim's most healing elements include "rituals of status reversal, play, and other phenomena of liminality." Following Turner, he calls these elements "communitas."[183] Each of these elements offers some insight into Purim's ability to help Jews cope with their terrifying pasts.

[183] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 249.

HUMOR

Purim can be equated with hilarity and humor. Filled with parody, satire and buffoonery, this holiday is highly enjoyable. As Arthur Waskow points out, however, "the laughter of Purim is not a gentle laughter: it is a kind of angry, blood-red humor that celebrates the tyrant's overthrow."[184] Purim is not a time for "knock-knock" jokes or comedy routines. Its humor is dark, allowing the people of the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center to dress up as Hitler or SS officers, and for people to howl and laugh as the Bobover rebbe's assistants strike an audience member with a stick, drawing blood.

Many have questioned the appropriateness of angry humor. Should it ever be acceptable? Since Hippocrates, in the fifth-century BCE, people have recognized the medicinal power of humor, but can it offer anything useful to those who have lived through unspeakable evil like the Holocaust? Terrence Des Pres believes it can. "That something so slight should alleviate the burden of something so gigantic might, on the face of it, be a joke in itself. But then, humor counts most in precisely those situations where more decisive remedies fail."[185] Des Pres continues, arguing that although it has been said that "the comic attitude" towards the Holocaust "is irreverent, a mode that belittles or cheapens the moral severity of its subject," we cannot dispute its survival value. During the Holocaust, jokes helped people to keep going in the ghetto. "In dark times," Des Pres explains, "laughter lightens the burden."[186]

Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson put forth another reason that humor is effective: oppressors use it to demean their victims. Humor can also be used by victims

---

[184] Waskow, *Seasons of Our Joy*, 115.
[185] Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter*?" *Writing and the* Holocaust, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988), 218.
[186] Ibid., 218-219.

as a means of accepting and taking pride in their identity—including the stereotypes thrust upon them.[187] To be sure, Boskin and Dorinson focus on internal humor, while Purim includes both internal and external humor –making fun of both the Jewish People and their oppressors. But their point holds externally as well. Through humor, Jews are able to demean their oppressors much as their oppressors once ridiculed them. Reversal allows Jews, through humor, to give their enemies a dose of their own medicine, delighting in both the downfall of these enemies and in their personal freedom.

Humor, and "a comic response to calamity," according to Des Pres, "is often more resilient, more effectively equal to terror and the sources of terror than a response that is solemn or tragic…the comic spirit ridicules what comes to pass."[188] Humor is wild and unfathomable. It is a release of emotions, which, without judgment, allows people to express the horrors of their past. For some survivors, no other venue could function as effectively.

"PLAY TIME"

Purim encourages Jews to take on new roles. In Landsberg people became former oppressors, while many Bobovers became more aggressive versions of themselves. Jews partake in actions completely outside of their comfort zones. Monford Harris argues that these new roles turn Purim into a "play time," enabling people to view themselves while acting in alternative roles. This is a conscious and active process, encouraging people to laugh at themselves and at current realities through role reversal.[189] Eugene Fink

---

[187] Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly* 37:1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring 1985), 97.
[188] Des Pres, "Holocaust *Laughter*?" 220.
[189] Harris "Purim," 167-8.

describes this phenomenon as schizophrenic since the player becomes a new role while aware of his double existence. "Man exists in two spheres simultaneously, not for lack of concentration or out of forgetfulness but because the double personality is essential to play."[190] In the face of a threatening past, playful role-reversals transform the hostility of the past into celebration and laughter in the present. Through the disorder these roles initiate, Jews reflect on their situations, allowing them to bring order back into their lives.[191] Purim becomes far more than an opportunity to dress up in silly costumes and have fun. For Jews surviving the Holocaust, it was a playful opportunity to come to terms with their past and their present.

COMMUNITAS

Social structure is usually hierarchical, with people falling into different classifications of power and social status. At various times in history – for Jews, the Holocaust – such structures dissolve. Victor Turner studied what happens within a community when normative structures are not in place, describing it as a "liminal time" in which "alternative modalities of social relatedness appear." Instead of hierarchy and social distinctions, roles are homogenized, and boundaries between people broken down. People are reminded that at a deeper level, all of its members are human and equal, despite the accepted social and hierarchical differences." [192] Turner, and Rubenstein after him, calls this reversal of status "communitas." This experience allows members of a society to reevaluate its social structures.

---

[190] Ibid., 166-167.
[191] Ibid., 169-170.
[192] Rubenstein, "Purim, Liminality and Communitas," 250-251.

Purim gives Jews an opportunity to revisit this time of liminality and communitas. Once again living in a time of social structure, Jewish communities benefit from the opportunity to strip members of the community of their status in order to foster a greater sense of unity. This happens in a number of ways. Yeshiva boys take over the roles of the head the yeshiva or the rabbi, forcing him to grin and bear any mocking or criticism they throw his way. In the Bobover community, men are forced to accept the aggressive behavior of women who chastise them during the purimshpiel. In Landsberg, German officers were forced to watch as Jews mocked Hitler and Nazi forces.

A sense of liminality is furthered as Jews become intoxicated, and act with "uninhabited boisterousness, frivolity, and general wildness." People come together over food, and exchange food gifts, taking down the boundaries between rich and poor, and symbolizing "the interrelatedness of the individuals.… Feasting, drinking, and the exchange of gifts combine with masks, costumes, parading, and Purim plays to create a mood of ecstasy and release." Each of these elements "encourage spontaneous celebration" and "the destruction of normal protocol," fostering a greater sense of community.[193] Purim, therefore, becomes a way to reenter the state of liminality Jews experienced during a painful past, but to do so in order to rebuild their bonds from within, in defiance to destruction they once experienced.

Purim provides a rare opportunity for Jews to step out of their natural roles, and take on new ones. They can mock those who normally serve in positions of power, while being generous with people who usually have very little. They can let out their anger and act with uninhibited emotions, without fear of judgment or punishment. There is no doubt

[193] Ibid., 259-260.

that Purim offered a much-needed release for Holocaust survivors, and survivors of many calamities throughout history.

SECTION 2: AMALEKIZATION

In recent years, scholars such as Elliot Horowitz have criticized Purim for being inherently racist, inspiring Jews to categorize their opponents as contemporary versions of Amalek, the eternal Jewish enemy. Horowitz claims that this prejudice led Jews throughout history to commit acts of violence on Purim, in the name of Jewish tradition. Most recently, he cites the shocking events of Purim 1994, when extremist Baruch Goldstein massacred twenty-nine praying Muslims in Hebron. Operating under the assumption that these Palestinian Muslims were modern-day members of Amalek, Goldstein believed his actions to be holy. He was following the Torah commandment, which teaches us to "obliterate the memory of Amalek from under the heavens."[194] Horowitz cites a number of these disturbing incidents. Although he offers a compelling argument for a relationship between Purim and the actions of extremists, such as Goldstein, I believe that Horowitz takes his argument too far.

The popularity of Purim throughout the Middle Ages and on into modernity was, in part, a response to the persecution that Jews faced. It was, of course, also a response to a lot more: the fun the day entailed; the role it played as a mechanism to reverse roles; and a release valve for the animosities within Jewish society itself. But in addition, as Jews lived through a variety of compromising environments, they sought Purim as a means to express their anger. In this chapter, we will explore the relationship between Purim, Amalek, violence, and persecution. We shall see that a select few deranged individuals took this opportunity too far, leading to deplorable violence, but that they are in the minority.

---

[194] Deuteronomy 25:19

Does *Megillat Esther* set the tone for racism and violence on Purim?

Christian scholars have been critical of the Book of Esther for being malicious. Paul Heinisch, for example, criticizes the book's revengeful conclusion, in which Haman and his sons were hanged. He is disturbed by the joy Jews are depicted as showing in enacting this retribution.[195] Alastair G. Hunter similarly criticizes Purim, in his case, by fastening on the way in which Jews have celebrated the downfall of Hamans throughout history. "It is safe to say that outside Judaism there is no popular celebration of the culture of the Amalekites, no remembrance industry ennobling their sacrifice in the name of other People's hope, no heroic wall inscribed with the names of Agag and his People."[196] Modern-day Hamans do not exist, according to Hunter. The Amalekites were destroyed long ago, and with these enemies, hatred towards them should have dissipated as well. "Perhaps I am naïve, but I am honestly vexed to understand how a policy of genocide [of the Amalekites in the *Tanakh*] can be held to be evidence of supreme morality," argues Hunter. "When we find ourselves excusing mass slaughter in the name of morality we have reached a serious pass—though not one, perhaps, entirely unfamiliar to the twentieth century. This kind of twisted logic is not greatly different to that used in the Third Reich to legitimate the murder of Jews."[197] Hunter does have a point in seeing violence flowing from the joy with which *Megillat Esther* celebrates the downfall of another, but he takes his argument too far. Not only have Jews never actively sought to

---

[195] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 37.
[196] Alastair G. Hunter, "(De)nominating Amalek: Racist Stereotyping in the Bible and the Justification of Discrimination," in *Sanctified Aggression:Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, eds. Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood (Great Britain: Cromwell Press, 2003), 102.
[197] Ibid., 100-101.

destroy a People, but his comparison of the Jewish People to Nazis less than sixty years after the Holocaust is vengeful in its own right.

Hunter is not the only Christian scholar to compare the Jewish People to Nazis, however. Finding all of the Jewish characters in Esther as inherently flawed, Cambridge educated Angelican reverand Laurence Brown described Mordecai as a Jewish proto-Hitler, desiring the destruction of all Gentiles.[198] Methodist W. L. Northridge goes so far as to describe the Book of Esther as "Jewish vindictiveness at its worst."[199]

Jewish scholars have responded to these claims. Herbert Loewe, for example, takes offense particularly at their timing—as many of them were written during or slightly after the Nazi's rise to power. "Let us assume that the Book of Esther 'typifies Jewish vindictiveness at its worst'…shall we then go on to say that Hitler's barbarity typifies 'Christian vindictiveness at its worst'?" Loewe argues, "if we take the description of the events narrated [in Esther] at face value, we have a situation not very different from [those of] Jews in Germany"[200] Loewe believes that considering the events of Holocaust, rejoicing in the downfall of a modern-day Haman is more than understandable; it is expected and necessary.

Hebrew Union College professor Samuel Sandmel has expressed two opinions. He began by arguing that the Scroll of Esther has "no place in Scripture, both because of its barbarity and what seemed to me then its unreality." He felt that the text had no positive purpose, and should be taken from the cannon of Jewish literature. By 1972, he was ready to admit that "The book [of Esther] offers encouragement to a beleaguered community." While "it has a vindictive, even ferociously vengeful spirit in which

---

[198] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 40.
[199] Ibid., 36-37.
[200] As qtd. in Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 37.

retaliation becomes possible and lamentably indiscriminate," in the wake of the Holocaust, he has "no fondness for the close of the book, which described the slaughter of foes."[201]

Like it or not, however, as Sandmel realizes the book of Esther is a helpful framework through which to view our People's suffering. It may not always be politically correct or warmly predisposed to the host culture in which Jews have lived—but those cultures were not particularly fond of their Jews either! The Book of Esther offers the Jewish People hope, above all, that we can overcome the harshest trials and celebrate in our miraculous survival.

A legacy of Purim violence

Elliot Horowitz's feelings towards Purim and *Megillat Esther* are far less sympathetic, even than Sandmel's. He begins with demonstrating the extent to which Purim evolved into the one Jewish occasion allowing a ritual expression and release of vengeful emotions. Jews harboring feelings of contempt towards non-Jews felt that Purim released them—and sometimes even compelled them—to commit violent acts. He cites numerous examples of Jews acting mercilessly with non-Jews. For example, in the fifth-century, Syrian Jews fastened a Christian boy to a gibbet (in recollection of gallows) and whipped him to death on Purim. In 576 CE, a Jew in France threw "rancid oil" on a recently baptized man when he entered the city as part of an Easter procession. During Purim 1192, Jews in France executed on a gallows a Christian who had murdered a Jew, with the backing of a Christian countess. On Purim 1236, a Jew in Narbonne, France

[201] Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 504; Samuel Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 35-36; as qtd in Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 45.

killed a Christian in a fight. During "Holy Week" 1389, a Jew in Prague "threw a stone at the monstrance carried by a priest." In 1609, Jews in Rome threw household objects at participants in a Christian parody of a Jewish funeral, causing many injuries.[202] Horowitz's list goes on and on.

Despite this montage of immoral acts, Hillel Halkin is not impressed with Horowitz's position. Halkin believes that considering a Jewish history of persecution over a two-thousand-year period, the evidence of Purim-linked-violence against Christians is relatively sparse. Abby Wisse Schachter criticizes Horowitz's broad-ranging charge that "Purim has long been the occasion for outbreaks of Jewish animosity and even violence toward Christians," saying that "Horowitz based this bizarre thesis largely on the fact that Baruch Goldstein's massacre of 29 Arabs in Hebron in 1994 occurred on Purim."[203] A few isolated violent actions on and around Purim do not constitute a sustained pattern of Purim-linked-violence. A select few are not representative of the norm.

For Halkin, the relationship between Purim and violence is tenuous at best. Actually, the sparsity of violent incidents that Horowitz is able to cite demonstrates how surprisingly non-violent the Jewish People are. It is natural for Jews to have felt violently against their enemies and persecutors. All oppressed people feel this type of hostility towards their oppressors. Such hostile feelings are uninteresting. "What is interesting is how Jews coped with these feelings—and in this way they were atypical, not because they did not act violently towards Christians but because they did not act violently toward themselves." Most oppressed people (African Americans, for example), focus violence

---

[202] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*.
[203] Abby Wisse Schachter, "The Problem with Purim," *Commentary Magazine* (February 2010), 34-39.

inward, because of potential repercussions of combating their oppressors. This was not so among Jews in Christian Europe. While war and mayhem may indeed have been somewhat common during the biblical period through classical antiquity, violence dissipated during medieval and modern times, until the creation of the State of Israel. Halkin believes that Horowitz made the error of conflating Jewish history, assuming that since violence appeared at various times, it must have always been present. Horowitz fails to consider that violence has been a part of all Peoples' history. [204] Halkin criticizes Horowitz for thinking "that the fact that Jews, like every other People on the face of the earth, have resorted to violence on occasion—and that they have a literature in which such violence is sometimes condoned and praised and the destruction of their enemies hoped for—is a 'dark' secret" he deserves admiration for exposing. Anyone who has studied Jewish history, or who has read in the Torah or Passover Seder about the plagues thrust upon the Egyptian people, and ultimate destruction of the Egyptian army in the Sea of Reeds is well aware of the violence present in Jewish history.[205]

Halkin has a point. It is not surprising that Jews, like any other People, have violence in their history, especially towards cruel oppressors. But all peoples do not have texts that put down an eternal enemy; nor do they see contemporary foes as modern representatives of that enemy, to be destroyed. Horowitz may be right here, when he points out that Amalek was once seen only as a blood enemy, but that the Middle Ages recast Amalek as a "moral or metaphysical category," which allowed Jews to classify anyone they wished as Amalekites. Halkin ignores Horowitz's compelling demonstration

---

[204] Halkin, Hillel "Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence," review of *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, by Elliot Horowitz, *Commentary* 121:6 (June 2006), 65-9; Halkin, Hillel "Bloody Jews?" *Commentary* (May 2007), 46.

[205] Halkin, Hillel and Elliot Horowitz, "The Dark Side," review of *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, by Elliot Horowitz, *Commentary*, October 1, 2006.

of this Amalekization of the enemy. "Since the Bible commands Jews to exterminate all Amalekites—'male and females, young and old,'" he writes, "it would seem that attaching the appellation to people or individuals" including Nazis and Palestinians "would be of some relevance."[206]

Amalekization of the "enemy"

Jews have called many oppressors "Amalek" over the years. During her childhood in Polotsk, Belarus, Mary Antin remembers Jews referring to Alexander III as a latter-day Haman; from the very first years of his rule, he incited anti-Jewish violence, and limited Jews' rights.[207] Freedom fighters of Israel referred to the British as Amalek because they believed them to be dangerous and wicked.[208] Uvi Zvi Greenberg referred to "the kingdom of Amalek on the Sniester," in remembrance of his family's narrow escape from the 1918 pogrom in Lemberg, Ukraine."[209] At the end of World War I, when his native Eastern European Jews suffered from dislocation, humiliation and bloodshed to German, Austrian, Polish and Russian forces, journalist Abraham Sachs wrote, "We meet the Hamans today as we met them a thousand years ago."[210] In 1941, Hyman Goldin similarly wrote "Haman, the hater of the Jews, and Mordecai, the Jew, who insists on worshiping God in is own way, are not mere figures in history." We can find these Hamans "in every land where there are Mordecais."[211]

---

[206] Ibid.
[207] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 83.
[208] Gerald Cromer, "Amalek as Other, Other as Amalek: Interpreting a Violent Biblical Narrative," *Qualitative Sociology* 24:2 (2001), 196.
[209] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 140.
[210] Ibid.,, 81; Sachs, *Worlds That Passed*, 282-286.
[211] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 81.

This trend continues today, with the Amalekization of Arabs. Moshe Feiglin, the Israeli politician who founded the *Zo Artzeinu* movement, told reporter Jeffrey Goldberg that even if he couldn't link Arabs with Amalek through genetics, their "behavior" was "typical" of Amalek. Similarly, when Yasser Arafat died in November 2004, *Pikuach Nefesh*—two hundred rabbis opposing Israel giving territorial concessions—said that "the day of Arafat's death should be a day of rejoicing" since the Palestinian leader was "the Amalek and the Hitler of our Generation"[212] Journalist Liat Collins compared Former President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to Haman, while journalist Sarah Honig described Arafat and his brainwashed pupils as "the real villains of the latter-day Megillah."[213]

The most popular type of Amalekization in modern history, however, relates Hitler to Haman, and Nazis to the Amalekites. Beginning in the 1930s, it was common to use "Amalek" to describe Nazi Germany and other anti-Semitic regions of Europe. As Hitler ascended to power "the antagonism between Haman and Mordecai became a favorite metaphor for the adversarial relationship between the Jews and those evil forces emanating from Germany that threatened the entire world."[214] Reform rabbi Joachim Prinz of Berlin remarked that after 1933 "people came by the thousands to the synagogue to listen to the story of Haman and Esther," which "became the story of our own lives." These Jews, dealing with the Nuremberg Laws found that the Megillah "suddenly made sense… it was quite clear that Haman meant Hitler." The Megillah reading stirred up powerful emotions. Prinz notes, "Never had I heard such applause in a synagogue when

---

[212] Gary Fitleberg, "Arafat's Death Welcomed by Yesha," *Haaretz*, November 12, 2004.
[213] Liat Collins, "The ghost of Purims past," *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 2006; Sarah Honig, "Purim-spiel priorities," *Jerusalem Post*, March 24, 2000.
[214] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 80, 140.

the names of Haman's ten sons were read, describing their hanging from the gallows….Every time we read 'Haman' the people heard Hitler, and the noise was deafening."[215] In 1946, when Nazi chieftains were hanged in Nuremberg for crimes against humanity, a New York Post article described the offenders as "the ten sons of Haman of our own day" [216] This metaphor continued, with illustrations like the one by Poland born Arthur Szyk in 1950. Szyk drew himself contemplating Haman's death while transcribing the final verses of the Megillah and eating Hamantashen. Haman, dressed in a Nazi uniform, was hanging on the gallows.[217] Amalekization of Hitler became so mainstream that in 1946, American Alexander Kohanski felt the need to create a children's book furthering the comparison between Hitler and Haman:

> "This fellow, this Haman, like Hitler today,
> He said to the sov'reign, Ah'suerus the king:
> 'With shekels your coffers I'll fill in a day;
> Just seal my decree with Your Majesty's ring'"[218]

For many, then, Purim came alive through the experiences and understandings of the Holocaust. Avi Shafran explains that he never understood the hatred his father had for Nazis, until he studied the Holocaust at the age of fourteen. He was surprised by the extent of his emotional response:

> "What was most shocking to find myself thinking, though, was that my father wasn't crazy for his conviction that the Nazis were this century's manifestation of Amalek, the Torah's epithet for evil incarnate. Though I had always been careful not to challenge him on that assertion, I had often reminded myself that not every murderer, not even every murderous People, is Amalek. There are a lot of rotten folk around, but only a prophet may identify Amalek; we lesser

---

[215] Ibid., 85-86.
[216] Goodman, *Purim Anthology*, 374-377.
[217] This picture appears in Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 105.
[218] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 92.

> mortals should shun hasty conjecture. Now, though, I found myself suddenly less sure…"[219]

Despite his prior hesitancy, Shafran allowed himself to demonize the Nazis as a murderous, evil people, much like Amalek. He could not fathom any other explanation for the events of the Holocaust.

There were so many instances of oppression among the Jewish People, both personal and communal that people began to create individual Purims in commemoration of their survival. There are well over one hundred instances of this tradition since the twelfth century.[220] For example, in 1524, the Jews of Cairo established a second Purim, called *Purim Mizroyam*, on the 28th of Adar, in commemoration of the date on which they were saved from extermination. The Jews of Frankfort on the Main established *Purim Winz* on the 20th of Adar, celebrating the re-admittance of expelled Jews to the town and the execution of the chief Jew-baiter, Vincenz Fettmilch. The Jews of Tiberias created a smaller Purim celebration on the 7th of Elul, 1743, when they were saved from threats of war from surrounding Arab countries.[221]

The calendrical Purim of Adar 15th was not a sufficient outlet for the Holocaust survivors of Morocco, either. They decided to create an additional mini-Purim in 1943, which takes place every year on the 20th of Kislev, the anniversary of the date on which American soldiers liberated them from Nazi forces. They even wrote an original version of the Megillah for their community, called *Megillat Hitler*.[222] This scroll was written in Hebrew by Asher Hassine, a Hebrew teacher still resident in Morocco who would later

---

[219] Avi Shafran, "Purim and the Holocaust: Amalek again?" *Innernet Magazine* , accessed December 5, 2010, http://www.innernet.org.il/printArticle.php?id=202.
[220] Epstein "Drama on a Table," 196.
[221] Orthodox Union, "When is Purim Observed?" February 2008, http://www.ou.org/holidays/purim/when_is_purim_observed
[222] Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 91.

become a Knesset member living in Bat-Yam, Israel. It is a reminiscent of the Book of Esther. At the introduction to the scroll, Hassine explains, "I think it is our duty to read this Megillah every year on November 11th and to celebrate a 'little Purim' which after the war ends will be established as a great Purim." He warns that "This Megillah is not to be considered a humorous parody, but a serious Megillah, a real Megillah," to be read in the melody of *Megillat Esther*.[223] The scroll tells the story of "Hitler the house-painter, the corporal who ruled all of Germany" who had a great wrath for the Jewish People, and upon seeing them flee remarked, "I have not yet avenged my fathers, Haman and Amalek." Jews tore their garments and put on sackcloth, fearing for their lives. They fled whenever possible. "And it was in the third year of the war," the scroll continues, "and the American put on vengeance and came to the aid" of Britain and the Jews. The scroll ends with blessings for heroes who saved them, including Roosevelt and Stalin, and curses for the "ten sons of Haman," including Himmler, Mussolini, the Gestapo, Hitler's counselors and the anti-Semites.

Hassiane creatively engineered a religious text reflective of the Moroccan Jewish experience of the Holocaust. Through it, he created a Purim celebration unique to their community. He explained that this holiday would enable the Moroccan Jews to memorialize "the aforesaid miracle that it may be remembered for ever and not forgotten by coming generations."[224] The Jews of Morocco could honor their past, celebrate in the downfall of their oppressor, and observe their communal redemption for all time.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Amalekization was extended beyond the realm of non-Jewish opponents when ultra-orthodox Israelis accused Zionists of being "Amalek's

---

[223] Michal Saraf, *The Hitler Scroll of North Africa: Moroccan and Tunisian Jewish Literature on the Fall of the Nazis* (Israel: Habermann Institute for Literary Research, 1988), English side 20-24, Hebrew side 46-51
[224] Saraf, *The Hitler Scroll of North Africa*, 24.

accomplices."[225] Believing that Zionists were "motivated by a deep hatred of Diaspora Jewry in general and of religious Jews in particular," several Orthodox leaders claimed that Zionism was solely responsible for the Holocaust. Moshe Sheinfeld of Agudat Israel, for example, charged Zionist leaders with having foreknowledge of what would happen to European Jewry under the Nazi regime, and actually helping the Holocaust to happen.[226] These Jews deemed Chaim Weizmann an enemy for incensing the Nazis and accused him of being pleased when he heard of what happened to Jews in Auschwitz, because this would help the Zionists to gain the world sympathy they required to acquire a Jewish state. Similarly, they accused left-wing Israeli parties of collaborating with the Nazis. According to the magazine *Mishpaha* "the Mapai leadership [in power during the Holocaust] and the Left deliberately dispatched millions of Jews to their destruction" while blocking "the escape routes of European Jews." The Reform movement of the United States was seen as being in cahoots with the Left and trying to "suppress reports of the Holocaust so as to prevent rescue."[227] They believed that Zionists worked with the Nazis in order to force Jews to leave Europe, and gain enough sympathy so as to acquire the support they needed to form the State of Israel.[228] Difficult as it is to accept this accusation, we can understand it as a convenient argument for Jews struggling to come to terms with God's place in the Holocaust.[229] Additionally, orthodox used this accusation for religious motives—painting Zionism as the arch-enemy of the Jewish people, and associating liberals in Israeli politics as supporters of the Zionist "enemy." By

---

[225] Dina Porat, "Amalek's Accomplices: Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel during the 1980s" *Journal of Contemporary History*, 27:4 (Oct 1992), 695.
[226] Ibid., 698-699.
[227] Ibid., 700-702.
[228] Ibid., 706.
[229] Ibid., 713-714.

stigmatizing parties on the left as "Amalek's accomplices," ultra-orthodox leaders were able to argue for an Orthodox Halachic state whose government would not include the corrupt and evil leftist Zionists.[230]

Why Amalekization?

Gerald Cromer identifies two types of Amalekization. The first is the "othering" of a group or people deemed a primary threat. The second is the "othering" of secondary enemies, including the gentile other, the Jewish other, and in some more modern interpretations, the evil inclination that is present in every Jew.[231] While there are similarities between these two types of "othering," the motivations behind them are different.

PRIMARY ENEMIES

At times of persecution, it is not surprising that Jews might distance themselves from their oppressors by emphasizing their differences, and even demonizing them. "Unable to defeat their enemies," Cromer says, "they had to make do with demonizing them." As a result, Jews labeled British forces, Arabs, Nazis, and a variety of other adversaries over the years as the Jewish archenemy: the Amalekites. Martin Gilbert notes that contemporary antagonists "are not only stigmatized in their own right, but also as the modern day equivalent of the anti-Semites of yesteryear."[232]

In large part, "othering" of an oppressor is both natural and understandable. The Nazis, largely considered the worst Jewish opponent in recent history, intentionally

[230] Ibid., 722-744.
[231] Cromer, "Amalek as Other," 191.
[232] Ibid., 192.

sought opportunities to destroy the Jewish People physically—and also spiritually by purposefully keeping track of the Jewish calendar, and causing additional hardship on holy days.[233] They forbade Jews from gathering for communal prayer on the holiest days of the year, and insisted that Jewish shops remained opened on all holidays, including Shabbat. Survivor Chaim Kaplan wrote, "Never before was there a government so evil that it would forbid an entire People to pray."[234] Nazi cruelty went even further when they not only restricted religious observance, but also turned the holiest days of the year into ones of mourning. Suvivor Shimon Huberband recalled a running "joke" in the ghetto: "If we can endure for twenty-one days, then we'll be saved. Namely, eight days of Passover, eight days of Succot, two days of Rosh Hashanah, two days of Shavuot, and one day of Yom Kippur."[235] David Patterson understands this policy as seeking "to destroy Jewish souls [as well as] Jewish bodies" and "murdering the Holy One…in the process of murdering Jews."[236]

Aware of the deeper meaning of Purim, Nazis particularly focused on this joyous day. On Purim eve 1943, Nazis took 100 Jewish doctors and their families to a cemetery in Czestochowa to be shot. The next day, they tricked Jewish doctors from Radom into believing that they would go to Palestine. When they arrived in nearby Szdlowieck, they found graves awaiting them, and were killed on the spot. Another Purim hoax happened to the Jews of Piotrkow that same day. Nazis claimed there was to be an exchange of Germans in Palestine for Jews. They asked for ten Jews to volunteer, then brought the

---

[233] Martin Gilbert, *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1986) 297.
[234] David Patterson, "The Chronicle of the Holy," in *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary* (United States of America: Patterson, 1999) 92.
[235] Ibid., 88.
[236] Ibid., 88, 93.

eight who did so to a nearby cemetery instead, where they shot them. To make the number an even ten, in honor of Haman's children, Nazis also killed the cemetery's watchman and his wife.[237]

On Purim 1942, Nazis killed thousands in Minsk and the Baronowicze ghetto in White Russia. In Baronowicze the Nazis played a particularly cruel joke when they ordered the Chairman of the Jewish Council and his secretary to create a list of the sick and older Jews of the ghetto. When they refused, both were shot, after being forced to watch the torture and execution of three-thousand Jews from their ghetto.[238] That same Purim in Zdunska Wola, the Gestapo forced the entire Jewish community to watch as Jewish policemen were made to hang ten young healthy Jews in honor of Haman's sons. Survivor Dora Rosenboim recalls that "the Gestapo drove all the Jews out of the houses to the hanging-place, so that all the Jews should witness the great catastrophe. Many women fainted seeing the terrible and horrible sight, how ten of our brothers were writhing on the gallows. Our faces were ashamed and our hearts ached, but we could not help ourselves."[239]

Mira Rycze Kimmelman narrowly escaped Nazi retaliation in the Tomaszow ghetto on Purim 1943. A few days before Purim, she became sick, and was ordered to stay in the hospital for three days. After two days, she felt well enough that she decided to go back to work. She recalls:

> "We had just stopped for lunch when all Jewish workers were told to assemble immediately in front of the buildings we worked in. Told to return right away to the Block, we entered the smaller ghetto escorted by police. Because this was unusual, we felt uneasy. When all workers were back in the Block, a curfew was declared. We were

[237] Gilbert, *The Holocaust*, 552-553.
[238] Ibid., 297-299.
[239] Ibid., 299.

> ordered to stay in our rooms. Anyone leaving the living quarters would be shot, we were told….The horrible truth and news of this day's happenings spread like wildfire once the curfew was lifted. The SS had surrounded our makeshift hospital, taken Dr. Mortkowicz, with his only daughter, the nurse, and all the patients who were in the hospital at the time. Then they took the rest of the intelligentsia. All were driven by truck to the Jewish cemetery. Open graves had been prepared ahead of time. The victims were ordered to undress, then lined up in front of the graves and murdered by machine-gun fire. Had I stayed one more day in the hospital as the doctor ordered, I, too, would have been among the unfortunate victims on this fateful Purim day."[240]

Each of these examples demonstrates unfathomable cruelty to the Jewish People. Not only were Jews forced to disregard Jewish holidays, but they would come to dread them as days of sorrow and grief. The Nazis purposefully used the imagery of Haman's gallows to hang Jewish prisoners. In this way, the Nazis made the powerful statement that Jews are like Amalekites, to be destroyed at the end of the story.

But Nazi Amalekization of Jews is the reverse of what normally occurred. Our interest here is Jews who Amalekized their Nazi torturers, who seemed to enjoy the pain they caused the Jewish prisoners. Examples of cruelty against Jews on their most sacred holidays demonstrate "how the executioners *experienced their deeds as a kind of 'transgressive' activity*," argues Stephen Frosh. "[I]t was precisely this 'transgressive' character…which accounted for the 'surplus-enjoyment' one got from excessively torturing the victims." Any shame felt by the Nazis only demonstrates "the unmistakable sign of the excess of *enjoyment* they got from their acts."[241] In this way, the Nazis demonstrated the kind of barbarianism and cruelty that Jews attribute to the Amalekites.

---

[240] Mira Ryczke Kimmelman, *Echos from the Holocaust: A Memoir* (Knoxville: Tennessee Press, 1997), 40-42.
[241] Stephen Frosh, "The Other," in *Hate and the 'Jewish Science': Anti-Semitism, Nazism and Psychoanalysis* (Great Britain: Antony Rowe Ltd, 2005), 199-200.

The pain of the heinous acts we described here is unfathomable. For Daniel Persky, Purim became an effort to "*silence* our pains by our yelling. Screams are the fit accompaniment for misery. The cry for help is the fit accompaniment for redemption." It is as if "we are flying in airplanes about the heights of the eternity of Israel to drop bombs in the form of noisemakers to shatter the ranks of our foes spiritually and psychically," he explained, "to wipe their evil from our hearts, to cause the murmur of our sorrow, the flame of our humiliation and the slings and arrows of our outrageous fortune, to be forgotten in a firmament-shattering and earth-shaking racket."[242] Survivors thus called oppressors "Amalek" as an attempt to name their pain, and scream out against it. It is one of the only tools Jews had cope with their pain and suffering.

Psychologist Stephen Frosh offers another possible explanation for Amalekization. One's identity, he says, is deeply linked to the primary relationships one has with others. Feeling "othered" at a young age can fill one with "inner doubts projected outward" and a deep hatred for everything and everyone. As this feeling of marginality increases, one feels progressively more isolated, more tempted to strike out and retaliate, and more apt to hate for hatred's sake. [243] During the Holocaust, Nazis forced people from their homes, separated family members from one another, and marginalized them in every way they could. Jews were forced to fight over morsels of food for survival, and to accept the cruelty of Nazi forces. It is not surprising, then, that Jews would wish to retaliate in any way possible. Isolation coupled with feelings of envy for the other's unobtainable peace and happiness filled many Jews with desire to destroy

---

[242] Daniel Persky, "Purim in Minsk, White Russia" in *The Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973), 53-55.
[243] Frosh, "The Other," 212-213.

their enemy in "an envious attack."[244] Acts of violence and disobedience cost many Jews their lives. Others resorted to a metaphorical type of retaliation: the Amalekization of their tormenters, the Nazis.

Frosh offers an additional reason for Amalekization: as a way to deal with fear and anger. Overcome with these extreme emotions, Jews chose to label their oppressor with the name of "the perfect enemy." The Amalekites no longer existed, but as a symbol, they could "be reinvented every time to face the subject's renewed wrath."[245] This gave their emotions context. Holocaust victims, like their ancestors of old, were in an eternal battle with the Jewish enemy. In the Torah the Amalekites represent pure evil. The relationship between the Amalekites and the Jews was clear: it was the Jews' obligation to wipe out Amalek from the face of the earth. It was easy to hate this type of enemy because it enabled Holocaust victims to project all of their negative emotions onto a symbol of unfathomable evil, justifying their extreme hostility for their oppressors. Some Holocaust victims were uncomfortable with their strong emotions of hatred, explains Frost. Labeling the enemy "Amalek" allowed them to project the worst aspects of themselves onto their enemy.[246]

On a more positive note, Amalekization offered suffering Jews hope. Just as Esther and the Jewish people had overcome Haman, and as the Jewish People had destroyed the Amalekites, one day Jews would overcome their current oppressor: the Nazis. Abraham Sachs explained that Hamans and Amalekites are present in all places that Mordecais live. Despite a rich history of subjugation "The Jew…does not lose courage. He feels sure that in the end the obstinate Mordecais will overcome the Hamans

[244] Ibid., 203.
[245] Ibid., 210-211.
[246] Ibid., 211.

who will meet their downfall, and Jews will rejoice again… The Jew laughs. He makes fun of the Hamans who seek to wipe out the people of Israel."[247] Holocaust victims held onto this hope through their Purim celebrations, and an application of the metaphors within.

SECONDARY ENEMIES

There are three types of secondary enemies, explains Cromer, including the gentile other, and the Jewish other. The motivations behind labeling secondary enemies as Amalek include (1) a particularistic desire to create a social or cultural identity; (2) a desire to advance one's own philosophy while belittling one's opponents; and (3) projection of one's worst characteristics onto others.

Frosh explains that a society structures itself according to patterns of identification. As a culture is established, society deems its unique characteristics as particularly significant.[248] Communities further cement their social and cultural identities by distancing themselves from outsiders; the Jewish People did so through focusing on select ways in which they differentiated from and proved superior to "the other."[249] Jews Amalakized their enemy by attributing "the other" with the Amalekites' barbaric and callous traits, and assuming that contrary to the "other," they did not possess a hint of the Amalekites' undesirable attributes. Jews polarized their oppressor to one extreme (evil) and themselves to the other (good), furthering a sense of moral superiority.

---

[247] Sachs, *Worlds That Passed*, 282-286.
[248] Frosh, "The Other," 198.
[249] Ibid., 198.
[249] Cromer, "Amalek as Other," 191-2.

Jewish communities have also used Amalekization to advance their beliefs. For example, labeling Arabs as "Amalek" puts forth the notion that Arabs are evil and entirely wrong in their positions on Middle East politics. Labeling Zionists and liberal, left wing Jews as "Amalek's accomplices" puts forth the notion that these communities are not trustworthy, and members of the ultra-Orthodox community are the only appropriate leaders for the Jewish state. Groups make a powerful statement when they "otherize opponents" by comparing to them as Amalek or the Nazis. Both put forth the notion that the "other" will lead everyone to "a holocaust of one kind or another," explains Cromer.[250]

During the Holocaust survivors may have been embarrassed or ashamed of their feelings of hatred; these feelings of guilt carry forward to today's politics. One way to deal with these emotions is to project them onto the other. Frosh explains that bigotry and racism often includes a "process of projection in which the denigrated other is made to carry unwanted aspects of the self." Jews distance themselves from their "repressed longings" to express their anger and hatred by claiming that they do not exist in the Jewish community. They accuse others "of behaving like animals because [they] long to behave like animals"[251] This tactic enables the Jewish community to deny personal responsibility for their feelings, while simultaneously justifying them.

A community tries to Amalekize a primary or secondary enemy upon perceiving it as a real threat. While primary enemies, such as the Nazis during the holocaust, represent an undeniable danger, secondary enemies are often a more convenient opponent. Communities choose these enemies for their own best interest, such as to

[250] Ibid., 200.
[251] Frosh, "The Other," 201, 203.

forward their philosophies, or gain political respect. A.B. Yehoshua warns against the Amalekization of secondary enemies, saying, "Not every dictator...is a Hitler and not every anti-Semite is a Nazi. The attempt to intensify opposition by having recourse to analogies from the World War II era can only diminish the force of the facts of the Holocaust events themselves." It is disingenuous and disrespectful to apply metaphors of primary enemies to those of secondary enemies. "Talk of the PLO as a Nazi organization only obscures the essential difference between the Nazi madness, the anti-Semite consistency of murdering every Jew simply because he is a Jew, and the (admittedly cruel) nationalist struggle to oust us from a certain territory," he explains.[252]

Jack Bloom furthers A. B. Yehoshua's point when he describes how he met a German woman who mourned for the six million Germans who died in World War II. She explained that the students, farmers, and clerks of Germany did not wish to die, but because they were German it is as if "their death did not count because [the Jewish People] suffered so!" Bloom stopped short, realizing that he had allowed himself to do to the German People what they had done to the Jews: depersonalization. "God's war with Amelek is an eternal war against depersonalizing people;" he explains. It epitomizes the evil that comes from blind hatred. Amalekization allows us to depersonalize the enemy, polarizing him as evil. Rather than labeling the enemy as Amalek, he explains, we should focus our energy on being —ירא אלהים-—fearful of God. Focusing on our relationships with God is much tougher because it requires "recognizing the divine uniqueness in every other."

This avoidance of generalizing the enemy is especially challenging because we need to generalize to get by in life. Yet, "*generalizing* is the *direct opposite* of

[252] Cromer, "Amalek as Other," 200-1.

recognizing each human being as a specific and different person," made in God's image to be "unique, and ultimately valuable. This treatment of the other is hard. Depersonalizing is a lot easier. It's in our bones. Being *undeterred by fear of God* is both natural and effortless." [253]

A. B. Yehoshua believes that, if anything, the holocaust should teach us to reject racism and chauvinism rather than to veil it in religious terms, such as "Amalek."

> "Having experiences in the flesh the price of racism and extreme nationalism we must reject their manifestations not only in the past, not only among ourselves. We must reject them everywhere and among all peoples. We must be the standard bearers of opposition to racism in all its forms and manifestations. Nazism was not only a German phenomenon. It is a general human phenomenon, and no people, and I stress *no people* is immune to it."[254]

A. B. Yehoshua and Jack Bloom wish to define Amalek in accordance with Cromer's third type of secondary enemy: as the evil inclination within us all. In a worldview that does not include primary enemies, secondary enemies easily fall into this role. Bloom explains "God is at war with the Amelek *in us* and *in others* in all generations. God has sworn us to an oath to wipe out Amalek." God commands us "to blot out the Amalek, which depersonalizes and destroys, both ourselves and others, lest it destroy the world."[255] The Amalekization of the evil inclination within differentiates from the other two types of secondary enemies in that it does not absolve us of personal responsibility. Rather, it challenges us to act as righteous people worthy of God's blessing. It is an acknowledgement that all of us have emotions and characteristics of which we are not proud. Rather than denying these aspects of the self, we can combat

---

[253] Jack Bloom, "Amalek and Us," *CCAR Journal* (Spring 2001), 53-4.
[254] Cromer, "Amalek as Other," 200-201.
[255] Bloom, "Amalek and Us," 54-55.

them, pushing ourselves and others to learn to real lesson of Purim: that blind racism and hatred is unacceptable.

Although there are important reasons for the Amalekization of primary enemies during times of horror and oppression, and during the recovery process after their defeat, Amalekization is more harmful than helpful when used against secondary enemies such as the “other gentile” and “other Jew.” In modernity, most Jews do not feel as if they have primary enemies. For this reason, Purim and Amalekization must be reinterpreted as a challenge of morality for contemporary liberal Jews.

CONCLUSION: PURIM TODAY AND TOMORROW

Purim's rich legacy has become an important instrument through which Holocaust victims could come to terms with their painful past. A shared Jewish story, as well as customs around humor, food, *tzedakah*, and pranks all play an important role in this process. This thesis demonstrates five specific ways in which Purim served as a coping mechanism, giving Holocaust victims the opportunity (1) to contextualize their experience through *Megillat Esther*; (2) to express their emotions of unbridled anger, horror and even envy; (3) to act with carnivalesque reckless abandon, allowing them to laugh at all they encountered; (4) to come together as one community deeply invested in one another; and (5) to find hope and inspiration to rebuild a better future.

Contextualizing one's experience through *Megillat Esther*

Like the Holocaust survivors I met, Joseph and Gerald, many victims of World War II read the story of Esther as *their* story. It was not a foreign tale written about Jews who lived thousands of years ago and overcame a foe now long dead. Rather, it was a narrative that spoke to the heart of their experiences. Although they once suffered under the hand of a cruel and ruthless oppressor, victory and redemption was theirs in the end.

Before the defeat of Nazi Germany, the Megillah helped Holocaust victims to contextualize their story within the greater scope of Jewish history. Jews had had many oppressors over the years, so they were not the first to experience persecution. It is hard to compare what they had to face to the situation of prior centuries. But they, like their medieval predecessors, could find hope in the story of *Megillat Esther*. Chaim the Rabbi offered this contextualization to his fellow Jews in Dachau, when he called for the death

of modern-day Haman. The community responded with cheers, and a desire to put on a Purim play reenacting the story of Esther, and Haman-Hitler's dreadful end. J.J. Cohen's fellow prisoners found a similar message in the text, when they reacted to finding a copy of *Megillat Esther* as if it was a sign of redemption.

After the Holocaust, victims continued to see the scroll as their story. Through it they could mourn the great losses to their families, their communities, and themselves. They could celebrate Hitler's defeat in a variety of ways. The residents of the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center resonated with the message of the scroll and in the speeches applying *Megillat Esther* to the experiences they underwent. The man who read *Megillat Esther* even dressed in his prisoner garb, symbolic of how far the community had come over just a few short months. The Bobover community applied the messages of redemption from *Megillat Esther* to a variety of purimshpiels as a way of helping members of their community to grapple with the past while maintaining faith in God and hope for a better future. The Jews of Morocco created an additional smaller Purim celebration, with their unique *Megillat Hitler* as a way of comparing their story to the *Megillat Esther*. They used the scroll and their extra Purim celebration as a way to memorialize their painful past, and celebrate their redemption.

Expressing emotions of unbridled anger, horror and envy

Purim offered survivors an additional opportunity to express bottled up emotions of anger and despair. Unlike any other day of the year, Purim encouraged them to be loud—even bawdy, and to retaliate symbolically against their enemy. They blotted out the name of Haman-Hitler with groggers, sticks, and stamping. They screamed and

howled each time *Megillat Esther* mentioned Haman's name. They consumed their enemy in the form of cookies and Purim delicacies. They also created puppets of their enemy, and burned or hanged him in effigy. The residents of Landsberg hanged puppets of Hitler all around town, near tombstones reading "Here lies Hitler. May his name be blotted out!" Each of these actions represents a symbolic retaliation against a newly-defeated enemy. During the Holocaust, it was nearly impossible for Jews to express these emotions. In freedom, they finally could make a well-deserved statement, rejoicing in the downfall of this cruel oppressor.

Acting with carnivalesque reckless abandon

Many Holocaust victims found comfort in Purim's precedent of acting with reckless abandon. Getting drunk, dressing up in costume, and acting outside of the norm became important components of the holiday for them. Bobovers pushed, shoved, yelled, and, at times, even bloodied one another in the Purim spirit. Jews in Landsberg Displaced Persons Center burnt copies of *Mein Kampf*, and mimicked the Nazis who once tormented them. Haim Sloves, Bobovers, Jews in Landsberg, and others created purimshpiels making fun of their lives in the ghetto, and mocking their enemies. These shpiels encouraged audience members to participate with cheers, screams, and other interactions, bringing their stories to life on the stage. These venues presented survivors with an opportunity for cathartic release of tension, anger, resentment, and a myriad of other emotions so intense that many survivors could not even articulate them.

Coming together as one community deeply invested in one another

Despite the bawdy nature of Purim, various rituals brought the community together. Jews gathered to hear the words of the Megillah. J.J. Cohen remarks on the miraculous way in which the words of the scroll changed interactions between camp prisoners. Whereas the day before they had been fighting over morsels of food, after they read the scroll, each prisoner generously offered his neighbor the scraps of food he had been saving, as a way of observing the commandment to give *mishlo'ach manot*. Holocaust victims, before and after Hitler's downfall, were able to unite over food gifts. They needed to consider the needs of one another, so that each and every Jew, regardless of his financial status, could fully celebrate the miracle of Jewish redemption. *Tzedakah* played a similar role.

Purim represents a time of liminality, when rank, wealth, gender and education become far less important. Dressed up in anonymous costumes, Jews have the opportunity to interact as equals. Whereas Haman and Hitler tried to depersonalize the Jewish People, these rituals offer a chance to see the equal divine spark inherent within each and every human being, cementing bonds and forging meaningful relationships.

Finding hope and inspiration for a better future

Purim offered Holocaust victims hope. In *Megillat Esther*, the Jews were able to overcome their oppressor, Haman. So too, this scroll encouraged Holocaust victims that they would overcome Hitler, bringing the days of his regime to a close.

Once Hitler was defeated, this metaphor continued to be meaningful. The Bobovers used it to re-frame the deaths of the millions Nazis murdered. They believed

that Holocaust victims were martyrs for God and for the Jewish tradition. They should be celebrated as Jewish heroes who made honorable sacrifices. The Bobovers also used this message to teach that if an enemy were to ever confront them again, they would have both faith and strength to be martyrs themselves for God's worthy cause. In the end, God would prevail.

Haim Sloves offered a sense of hopefulness for the Jews of Europe through his Yiddish purimshpiel *Homens Mapole*. The Yiddish language, as well as the shpiels' portrayal of an optimistic Jewish future provided hope for the revival of Jewish culture in Europe. The Jews of the Landsberg Displaced Persons Center experienced a similar sentiment in the dream they vocalized on Purim 1946 that one day they would live in a Jewish state, safe from oppressors like the Nazis.

***

We now approach a point in history where, because of old age, there are few Holocaust survivors remaining. Children born in 2011 may never meet or have the opportunity to speak to someone who has lived through this dark time in Jewish history. They may assume that Jewish anti-Semitism has never been a substantial problem. Purim has an entirely different meaning for these young Jews than it did for the Jewish communities of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. Purim can, however, remain a relevant and powerful tradition that speaks to our Jewish experiences if we re-adapt it for today.

I believe that we can honor Purim's rich legacy in three ways: (1) as a method of remember the Holocaust, and celebrating the Jewish People's survival in the face of this evil; (2) as an opportunity for community togetherness; and (3) as a universalistic call for justice.

Remembering the Holocaust

Megillat Esther should not be seen as a distant story to which the modern Jew is unable to relate. Even those of us who are fortunate enough to live in a world in which anti-Semitism is rare, need to realize that not all Jews have this blessing. Less than sixty years ago, Nazis killed millions of Jews. Anti-Semitism continues to run rampant in some parts of the world.

Purim gives us the opportunity to remember those who suffered at the hands of hateful forces in the greater framework of Jewish history. Whereas *Yom Hashoah*—Holocaust Memorial Day—focuses solely upon the hardship of Holocaust victims, Purim offers Jews the opportunity to contextualize the events of the Holocaust through a 2500 year old tradition, originating with *Megillat Esther*. Holocaust victims were not the first to suffer at the hands of oppressors, though through their experiences, we can better understand Jewish history. For this reason, we should include the words of Holocaust survivors, live or recorded poems, short stories, pictures and other memorabilia to honor their memories. This is important for a number of reasons. We do not want the lives lost to be in vain. The stories of Holocaust victims inspire us not to be complacent. We must actively seek out good relationships with others, and combat prejudice whenever possible. Additionally, we can be inspired by the courage and strength displayed by Holocaust victims. We can become increasingly thankful for the blessings that we have, and the rich legacy that has been handed down to us. We can also celebrate the miracle that despite many types of persecution over the years, Judaism and the Jewish People continue to live and thrive. Finally, *Megillat Esther* and the message of Purim gives us

the tools to deal with anti-Semitism in our own lives should we be unfortunate enough to encounter it.

Liturgically, we can include testimonials by Holocaust survivors, as well as readings that refer to those testimonials, thereby bringing them to the attention of our congregations. As early as 1940, the *Union Prayer Book* offered an example of such oblique references:

> "We come before You, O God, with words of praise and thanksgiving for the care and guidance under which Your People Israel has ever lived, and for the manifold blessings You have showered upon us and all humanity. This day brings to mind the darkness and gloom we have experienced in many generations. Painful trials and bitter struggles, torment of body and agony of mind have been our portion too many times. But sustained by the undying hope that in the end right will triumph over wrong, good over evil, and love over hate, we have held aloft the banner of Your truth."[256]

In 1939, the Central Conference of American Rabbis' Committee on Ceremonies prepared *Megillah Ritual*, which rehashes the many times in which the Jewish People have struggled for survival. After the reading of the Megillah, the text encourages the rabbi to present God as "our support through all the ages. As often as men rose against us to destroy us, the Holy One…delivered us out of their hands." The text mentions Roman legions who were unsuccessful in vanquishing the Jewish spirit thousands of years ago, and the Crusaders who "swooped upon the defenseless communities of Israel and with wife and sword wreaked vengeance upon a guiltless People," to be met with Jewish "courage and confidence," as ultimately "the cause of the righteous triumphed over the evil designs of the wicked." After the conclusion of the war, this text was amended to include the "vengeful" and "unspeakable cruel… godless Nazis, whose wicked designs to exterminate our people came close to fulfillment." The text continues:

---

[256] Central Conference of American Rabbis, *Union Prayer Book* (Cincinnati: CCAR Press, 1940), 83.

> "God reigns supreme in the world; and Israel still lives. The fury of Nazi hatred and cruelty has abated, and while the blood of its myriad victims still cries out from the earth, the power of the tyrant is broken, and the rage of the heathen no longer strikes terror in the hearts of men. Those who defied the will of God and profaned His law have perished in defeat and infamy, leaving no memorial to bless their name. But the spirit of the martyred millions, whose heritage of faith pulsed in their veins, still lives and works among men, a perpetual benediction to all mankind."

These two Reform texts encapsulate an appreciation for the hardship faced by our ancestors over the centuries and the miracle of the salvation of the Jewish People. We have a great for which to be thankful.

In 1946, Leopold Neuhaus suggested that communities recite the *shehechiyanu* blessing before reading *Megillat Esther*. He believed that in keeping with the hardship faced by Jews in the scroll as well as throughout history, we should commemorate Purim with a prayer of thanksgiving for "enabling us to reach this day."

Uniting the Jewish Community

Megillat Esther teaches the power of community togetherness. Jews all throughout Shushan fasted for three days in support of Esther and the greater Jewish community. Only at the end of this fast by everyone was Esther able to summon the personal courage she needed to confront the King and halt Haman's evil plot.

Purim provides us with an opportunity for stripping communities of the structures that divide its members—wealth, education, age, gender, and status—in order to interact with others on a more even plane. We can incorporate this beautiful tradition by encouraging members of our community to offer one another *mishlo'ach manot* gift baskets, anonymous *tzedakah* donations for members of the community who are in need, and a communal feast allowing everyone to eat a festive meal together. Purimshpiels,

pranks on the rabbi, and other opportunities to poke fun at the community provide additional opportunities for bonding, togetherness, and fun.

Each of these customs appears in liberal congregations today in some form. It is imperative, however, that we reinvigorate them by focusing on the reasons behind them. Sermons and newsletter articles from the rabbi should discuss the importance of *mishlo'ach manot*. Religious school students, sisterhood and brotherhood committees should be involved in bringing the community together through giving, humor, and any other constructive means of unifying the greater community in the Purim spirit. Through these means, we can transform Purim from a fun but meaningless holiday to one that resonates deeply with community members.

A Call for Justice

In light of injustice committed by the Amalekites, Haman, and the Nazis, Purim offers us the opportunity to reevaluate the way in which we allow others to be treated. I have not surveyed classical Reform prayer books here, but even a simple glance at them indicates that our Reform progenitors saw Purim in such a light. They were convinced that Purim calls upon us to combat prejudice, not just towards Jews but universally toward all people. We, the Jewish people, have known attempted genocide. All over the world other people still continue to suffer genocide and hardship—as I write this the example of Darfur comes quickly to mind. Purim reminds us of our responsibility to do all we can in the fight for others' freedom and survival.

I mentioned above the instance of classical Reform Judaism. Typical of its attitude is the following prayer from the 1940 edition of the *Union Prayer Book*:

> "Loyal to the memory of our heroic ancestors, we have come to affirm the living hope born in the prophetic soul of Israel, our People. Before the mighty onrush of Your light and love, we shall yet see the forces of darkness, cruel Amalek and vindictive Haman, succumb and vanish. And although many a bitter experience may await us before prejudice and hate shall have vanished, still we trust that in the end all humanity will unite in love. Grant us, Lord, the vision to see and the courage to do Your will. Imbue our hearts with the fidelity of Mordecai and the devotion of Esther, that we may never swerve from the path of duty and loyalty to our heritage. Endow us with patience and strength, with purity of heart and unity of purpose, that we may continue to proclaim Your law of love and truth to the peoples of the earth, until all have learned that they are one, the children of the Eternal God. Amen."[257]

These words remind us that as long as injustice exists in the world, we have an obligation to combat it.

A congregation should not utter words as powerful as these unless it can provide outlets through which to act upon them. Purim offers a powerful opportunity to rally together in support of universalistic justice—though rallies against genocide, interfaith programs, and advocacy for the less advantaged members of a community. Purim offers us a chance, rooted in our tradition, to do substantial social justice work. A congregation would be remiss not to act upon it.

In my childhood, I did not understand the depth of meaning inherent in the holiday of Purim. Now I understand it to be a celebration filled with the potential to commemorate the past, unite communities, and push us to act for the betterment of the community and the world at large. It is my hope that as a rabbi I can offer my congregations the opportunity to experience Purim for all it has to offer.

---

[257] Ibid., 403.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary sources consulted:

Tanakh, Megillah and Apocrypha:
Deuteronomy 25:2, 25:17-19, 31:18
I Samuel 15:1-34
II Samuel 2:7
Zecharia 8:9
Proverbs 10:7
Book of Esther 9:22
II Maccabees 15:36

Talmud:
Megillah 2a-4a, 7a-7b
PT Megillah 1:5
Baba Metziah 78b
Sanhedrin 64a-b

Medieval sources:
Joseph Karo, *Shulchan Aruch* 694:1-695:4 (with Moses Isserles' commentary)
Moses Maimonides, *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Megillah* 2:14-2:17

Secondary Sources:

Abrahams, Israel. *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages.* London: Jewish Publication Society, 1932.

Aronowicz, Annette. "The Downfall of Haman: Postwar Yiddish Theater Between Secular and Sacred." *AJS Review* 32:2 (2008): 369-388.

--- "*Homens mapole*: Hope in the Immediate Postwar Period." *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98:3 (Summer 2008): 355-388.

Appelfeld, Aharon. "After the Holocaust." In *Writing and the Holocaust*, translated by Jeffrey M Green, edited by Irving Howe, 83-92. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988.

Battersby, John. "Wrestling with rage, Israelis question peace." *Christian Science Monitor* 88:70 (March, 7 1996): 1.

Berlin, Adele. Intoduction to *The JPS Commentary of Esther*, xvi-lii. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001.

Binder, A. W. “Purim in Music.” In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 209-221. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Bloom, Jack. “Amalek and Us.” *CCAR Journal* (Spring 2001), 51-55.

Blum-Dobkin, Toby. “The Landsberg Carnival: Purim in a Displaced Persons Center.” In *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum*, 52-58. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979.

Boskin, Joseph and Joseph Dorinson. “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival.” *American Quarterly* 37:1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring 1985): 81-97.

Cohen, J. J. “Holocaust survivor recalls Purim in he Valley of Tears.” *Jewish Weekly*, March 17, 2000.

Collins, Liat. “The ghost of Purims past.” *Jerusalem Post*, March 17, 2006.

Cromer, Gerald. “Amalek as Other, Other as Amalek: Interpreting a Violent Biblical Narrative.” *Qualitative Sociology*, 24:2 (2001): 191-202.

Davidson, Israel. *Parody in Jewish Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1907.

--- “The History of Purim Parody in Jewish Literature.” In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 330-352. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Des Pres, Terrence "Holocaust *Laughter*?" In *Writing and the Holocaust*, edited by Irving Howe, 216-233. New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988.

Dick, Michael. “How should Jews regard Germany now?” *Columbus Dispatch*, Feb 22, 2002.

Epstein, Shifra. “The Bobover Hasidim Piremshpiyl: From Folk Drama for Purim to a Ritual of Transcending the Holocaust.” In *New World Hasidim: ethnographic studies of Hasidic Jews in America*, edited by Janet S. Belcove-Shalin, 237-256. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1995.

--- “Drama on a Table: The Bobover *Hasidim Piremshpiyl*.” In *Judaism Viewed From Within and From Without*, edited by Harvey E. Goldberg, 195-217. New York: State University of New York, 1983.

---“From Tel Aviv to Borough Park: Purim in the Twentieth Century.” In *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979.

--- “Going Far Away in Order to Better Understand the Familiar: Odyssey of a Jewish Folklorist into the Bobover Hasidic Community.” *Journal of American Folklore* 112:444 (1999): 200-212.

Fitleberg, Gary. “Arafat’s Death Welcomes by Yesha.” *Haaretz*, November 12, 2004.

Frosh, Stephen. “The Other.” In *Hate and the 'Jewish Science': Anti-Semitism, Nazism and Psychoanalysis*, 198-216. Great Britain: Antony Rowe Ltd, 2005.

Ganor, Solly. “Bearing Witness: A Purim Story from the Holocaust, Purim in Dachau.” March 18, 2005. http://www.chgs.umn.edu/histories/documentary/ganorBearingwitness.pdf.

Ganzfried, Solomon, *Code of Jewish Law (Kizur Shulhan Aruk*). Translated by Hyman E. Goldin. Vol. 3. New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1927.

Gaster, Theodore. *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition*. New York: Sutton Press, 1950.

Gelbard, Shmuel Pinchas. *Rite and Reason: 1050 Jewish Customs and Their Sources*. Translated by Rabbi Nachman Bulman. Israel: Mifal Rashi Publishing, 1995.

Gilbert, Martin. *The Holocaust: A History of the Jews of Europe During the Second World War*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1986.

Ginzberg, Louis. *Geonica*. Vol 2. New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1909.

Gold, Avie. *Purim: Its Observance and Significance*. Brooklyn: Artscroll Mesorah Series, 1991.

Goodman, Philip. *The Purim Anthology*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Grayzel, Solomon. “The Origin of Purim.” In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 3-13. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Greenstone, Julius H. *Jewish Feasts and Fasts*. Philadelphia: Bloch Publishing, 1946.

Halkin, Hillel. “Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence.” Review of *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, by Elliot Horowitz. *Commentary* 121:6 (June 2006): 65-9.

-- "Bloody Jews?" *Commentary* (May 2007): 40-48.

Halkin, Hillel and Elliot Horowitz. “The Dark Side.” Review of *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, by Elliot Horowitz. *Commentary*, October 1, 2006.

Harris, Monford. “Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order.” *Judaism,* January 26, 1977.

Honig, Sarah. “Purim-spiel priorities.” *Jerusalem Post*, March 24, 2000.

Horowitz, Elliot. *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Hunter, Alastair G. “(De)nominating Amalek: Racist Stereotyping in the Bible and the Justification of Discrimination.” In *Sanctified Aggression:Legacies of Biblical and Post-Biblical Vocabularies of Violence*, edited by Jonneke Bekkenkamp and Yvonne Sherwood, 92-108. Great Britain: Cromwell Press, 2003.

Kimmelman, Mira Ryczke. *Echos from the Holocaust: A Memoir*. Knoxville: Tennessee Press, 1997.

KiTov, Rabbi Eliyahu. *Book of Our Heritage*. Translated by Rabbi Nathan Bulman. Edited by Dovid Landesman. New York: Feldheim, 2000.

Kleinman, M.S. “*Or Yesharim*, Piotrrkov, 1924.” In *The Hasidic Anthology: Tales and Teachings of the Hasidim*, edited by Louis I Newman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934.

Levin, Shmarya. *Childhood in Exile*. Translated by Maurice Samuel. New Jersey: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1929.

Marcus, Jacob R. *The Jew in the Medieval World*. Cincinnati: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1938.

Marks, Gil. *Olive Trees and Honey*. New Jersey: Wiley Publishing, 2005.

Neuhaus, Leopold. “Purim 5706.” In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 159-161. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Orthodox Union. “When is Purim Observed?” February, 2008. http://www.ou.org/holidays/purim/when_is_purim_observed.

Patterson, David. “The Chronicle of the Holy.” In *Along the Edge of Annihilation: The Collapse and Recovery of Life in the Holocaust Diary*, 87-104. United States of America: Patterson, 1999.

Persky, Daniel. “Purim in Minsk, White Russia.” In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 53-55. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Phillipson, David. *The Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1931.

Picart, Bernard. *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of Various Nations of the Known World*. Vol. 1. London: W. Jackson: 1733.

Porat, Dina. "Amalek's Accomplices: Blaming Zionism for the Holocaust: Anti-Zionist Ultra-Orthodoxy in Israel during the 1980s." *Journal of Contemporary History*. 27:4 (Oct 1992): 695-729.

Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979.

Rudavsky, Dahlia C. "In Defense of Tradition: Haftarat Zachot in the Light of Purim." *Judaism*. 47:1 (Winter 1998): 80-86.

Rubenstein, Jeffrey. "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas" *AJS Review* 17:2 (1992): 247-77.

Rubin, Steven J. *Celebrating the Jewish Holidays*. Massachusetts: Brandies University Press, 2003.

Sachs, Abraham Sinchah. *Worlds That Passed.* Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1928.

Sachs, Curt. *History of Musical Instruments*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1940.

Saraf, Michal. *The Hitler Scroll of North Africa: Moroccan and Tunisian Jewish Literature on the Fall of the Nazis*. Israel: Habermann Institute for Literary Research, 1988.

Schachter, Abby Wisse. "The Problem with Purim" *Commentary Magazine* (February 2010): 34-39.

Shafran, Avi. "Purim and the Holocaust: Amalek again?" *Innernet Magazine*. Accessed December 5, 2010. http://www.innernet.org.il/printArticle.php?id=202

Shatzky, Jacob. "The History of Purim Plays." In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 357-367. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.

Shmeruk, Chone. "The Origins of the 'Purimshpil' and its 16th-century Remnants." In *Purim: The Face and the Mask; Essays and Catalogue of an Exhibition at the Yeshiva University Museum*. New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1979.

Shuman, Amy. "Food Gifts: Ritual Exchange and the Production of Excess Meaning." *Journal of American Folklore* 113:450 (2000): 495-508.

Strassfeld, Michael. "Purim: Self-mockery and Masquerade." In *The Jewish Holidays*, 187-200. New York: Harper Collins, 1985.

Central Conference of American Rabbis. *Union Prayer Book*. Cincinnati:CCAR Press, 1940.

Waskow, Arthur. *Seasons of Our Joy*. Massachusetts: Bantam Books, 1982.

Winshnitzer, Rachel. "The Esther Story in Art." In *Purim Anthology*, by Philip Goodman, 222-249. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973.