

Erev Purim Sermon by Rabbi Brad Bloom
February 26, 2010

What a creative people we are! Somehow we have the ability to take our pain and to reinterpret anti-Semitism and hatred by focusing on the salvation of our people rather than the hatred and persecution. Purim is exactly one of those celebrations when we defeat hatred with humor. We mock Haman and dress up in costumes and make Purim the craziest day of the year in terms of Jewish observances. It is our way of extracting the pain out of the suffering that anti-Semitism has caused us time and again over the years.

We have this ability to commemorate the tragic moment and turn it into a salvation in our history. For the Haggadah on Passover says, “not one alone has risen against us, but in every generation there are those who rise against us to destroy us; but the Holy One, blessed be He, rescues us from their hands.”

Purim obviously commemorates one of those events where Israel was saved by a miracle. Jewish history has a record of communities observing anniversaries to remember a timely release from tyrannical rules, but also to celebrate an escape from such disasters as plagues, earthquakes and conflagrations.

What is so fascinating is how these communities established observances of a day of deliverance. These festive occasions were known throughout history as “special Purims” after the biblical holiday and emphasized the spiritual lesson from the original Purim, which was, that the presence of God is involved in determining the destiny of the Jewish people.

We have records of private families that established special Purims to mark an escape from a danger that threatened the entire family. Families who established these special Purims emulated the original Purim by dispensing Tzedakah to the poor. In synagogues they recited special psalms and prayer. They created special megillot or scrolls which parody the style of the Book of Esther and are read on the annual anniversary of the historic days.

We should remember how strong the faith was in these families and communities that they created these special Purims. Many times their recollections included the verse from the Megillah which stated “relief and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place. (Esther 4:14). What will these stories teach us? History has taught us that we need our faith as well as the strength of our conviction to protect ourselves. Faith in God’s presence is still a mystery even to this day.

So I will share with you a few stories of these special Purims which have been recorded in the annals of Jewish history and whose records exist to this day. They all demonstrate the faith we had as well as the conviction to survive.

Purim Fettmilch

In medieval Frankfurt of the 17th century, the trade guilds always resented the Jews and planned an attack on the Jewish community. The leader of the anti-Semites was a baker named Vincent Fettmilch. On August, 22, 1614, they attacked the Jewish community. The Jews, knowing in advance of the attack,

prepared for the incursion. They sent the women and the children to the local cemetery and locked the gates to the Jewish ghetto. They went to the synagogue and prayed and fasted. Inside the synagogue, they heard the mob break through the gates of the shtetl. A fight ensued which led to the injuries on Jews and Christians. The mob plundered the Jewish quarter and the town council was able to temporarily stop the plunder asking the Jewish community to leave their homes which they did. The Jews of Frankfort left and found refuge in surrounding town and remained in exile from their home for over a year and a half. Eventually the crown intervened and captured Fettmilch and his band resulting in their beheading. The town council transferred the protection of the Jews to the aegis of the crown with the shield of the crown put up on the gates entering the Jewish community. There was dancing that day. The crown ordered the community to pay the Jewish people of Frankfort 175,919 florins for the damages the Jews incurred.

So in memory of these events the Jewish congregation of Frankfort, Germany annually celebrated the events on the 19th of Adar as a fast day commemorative the departure from the city and the 20th as a holiday called Purim Fettmilch, in memory of their return.

Two hundred years later in Palestine, the city of Hebron, ruled then by the Turkish Ottoman empire, ruler Ibrahim Pasha decided to attack the Arabs of the city. The Arabs put together an army against the Turks and ambushed the Pasha's forces. The Pasha swore to vanquish the entire population of Hebron. The Jews were frightened for their lives. They shut themselves in the courtyard and prayed to God to save them. The Jews escaped the wrath of the Turkish Pasha while the Arab population was slaughtered by the forces of the Pasha. Why did the Jews escape the vengeance of the Pasha? Apparently, there were Jewish generals in the service of the Turkish Pasha out of Damascus who accompanied him and intervened on their behalf and saved the Jewish population of Hebron. In memory of this event, the day of the new moon of Av became known as a day of rejoicing in the Hebron Jewish community as the "Purim of Ibrahim Pasha."

The Jews of Saragossa Spain experienced their own miracle of salvation. In the 15th century Saragossa was the capital of the kingdom of Aragon. It was the king's custom to visit the Street of the Jews and see the decorated Torahs borne in wooden cabinets, as is the practice of the Sephardim to this day. For whatever reason the Jews decided to bring their wooden Torah holders to greet the king but they did not contain the Torahs inside them. Maybe they were afraid of what someone might do to the scrolls themselves. A Jew who had converted out of the faith went to the king and informed him that the Jews would not bring their Torah out to greet the king on his next visit. So the king decided to make a surprise visit to the Jews of Saragossa and see for himself. The word got back to the synagogue officials and in a dream, they claimed, they received instructions to put the Torahs inside the wooden cabinets in anticipation of the King's surprise visit. Thus, the informer was shamed. The Jews avoided retribution. From that day on the 17th day of Shevat, the day on which this event happened, was named the second Purim. The Jews of Saragossa eventually, after the Inquisition, made their way to Jerusalem and for centuries observed this second Purim in memory of their salvation. A special scroll was written on parchment and has been preserved by the descendants of the Jews from Saragossa in Jerusalem. A special edition of this scroll was published in 1874.

Yes, the rabbis say pray as if everything depended upon God and act as if everything depended upon you. Good advice. It seems we have always faced the problem of living in an unpredictable and hostile world. We lived for centuries knowing that we always were vulnerable to an outbreak of hatred. Jews lived in a precarious way. The religious authorities were usually our greatest advisory and the crown, realizing our importance to the economy, protected us. But even they were not consistently on our side and gave in from time to time to the outbursts of hatred.

Yet we see that Jews did not take the view of ignoring or forgetting those stories. We enshrined them into our communal memory. Maybe with the state of Israel, we don't feel vulnerable in the same way. Yet with the Iranians and others in the Muslim world, who would destroy us in a minute, we pray that Israeli, American and other friends will provide us the stories that avoid terrorist attacks. These are stories we know occur but will never find their way in the canon of stories for years to come. Yet we know they exist. The Purim story of defeating the enemy with our strength and the providential guidance of God still exists to this very day.

Purim means lots that the Jews picked. One never knows what our fate will be but I suppose that the old lesson still rings true which are that life's challenges are all about how we play the cards that we receive. God is part of that game even though we never really know just how God fits in. That is the mystery of communal deliverance and individual faith.