



### **How to Celebrate Purim This Year**

For some, Purim is impossible because how can one celebrate while Israeli hostages are still in Gaza and the devastation of October 7<sup>th</sup> is so vivid in our minds and hearts.

For some, Purim is impossible because how can one celebrate a Biblical narrative in which tens of thousands of potential enemies are killed – for that is the narrative of Chapters 8 & 9 – when so many Gazans lie dead.

It's not an easy Purim.

But, perhaps, it can be our most significant, if we can embrace the reality of this narrative as one of sophistication and plurality – as opposed to merely an excuse to dress up or get drunk garbed in rabbinic approval.

The reality of the Book of Ester is that it is a story of a people at risk who work out how to survive and celebrate even despite everything. It's a deeply sophisticated tale set in a world where we are unsure of who is really our friend and before whom we can really bear our true identity. And if the first four chapters are a cautionary tale – and I'm convinced they are - then surely the last chapters can be read as a cautionary tale too. As a matter of historical record, there was no massacre. As a literary phenomenon, the numbers of those described killed are as grossly inflated as the size of Achashverosh's kingdom (127 states!), or the length of the opening banquet (180 days!). The cautionary question is, surely, is this really the world in which we want to live? It is a world where one attack breeds another. In the Friends Meeting House in which my former community, St Albans Masorti, used to meet there was a poster of escalating violence; one person hit another with a stick, they respond with a spear, then a gun and so on and so on. If we don't want this, how can we build a better society?

The Megillah itself ends with the King imposing a tax – it's an odd way to end, perhaps another cautionary reminder that in war and times of national suffering, the rich often find ways to get richer while the poor find their way is poorer.

Ester feels so very contemporary and so very suited to our bruised times. It's savage and satirical and, yes, distracting also. It's never been a kiddie story. It's never felt more important.

This Shabbat, Shabbat Zachor, Rabbi Natasha and I will be exploring the call to violence expressed in the Maftir which always precedes the reading of the Megillah. If that's your concern, do come. On Saturday night and Sunday morning, we'll let the story tell itself – with an adult focus on the evening, and a family focus in the morning. We are still taking bookings for our Saturday night banquet, in support of the Separated Child Foundation. For that and for more information on our youth activities, please see the website.

And don't forget the two other great Mitzvot of Purim – we are commanded to share gifts of food with our friends, and to give gifts for the poor. In acts of hospitality and charity we can all find strength, even in the toughest of Purims.

Shabbat Shalom, and Purim Sameach.

Rabbi Jeremy

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