

D'var Torah – Purim 5771

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By Rabbi Maurice Harris

Shabbat shalom. Tonight I'd like to focus on Purim, since it comes but once a year and arrives tomorrow night. Edith Deen writes, "Like many of the great characters in history, Esther makes her first appearance as one of the humblest of figures, an orphan Jewess."¹ Deen is right. Esther – also known by her Hebrew name, Hadassah – is introduced to us as an adopted child. The scroll of Esther states at its outset that her parents had died, and that she was raised by her cousin, the pious and virtuous Mordechai.

As many of you know, Esther is not alone in the *Tanakh* – the Hebrew Bible – as an adopted child who goes on to become a hero. The same holds true for Moses, who was adopted by the Pharaoh's daughter and raised in the Egyptian court. Like Esther, Moses also redeems his people from catastrophe.

Joseph, of Technicolor Dreamcoat fame in the Book of Genesis, comes to mind as well. Although he lived to be a teenager under his father's roof, his mother died when he was young and, when his jealous brothers sold him to slave-traders and told their father that he was dead, Joseph became an orphan of sorts. Bereft of his birth family, the sheltered and pampered youth goes on to save the day.

So what is it with orphans in the Bible, or for that matter, in the great stories of mythology and even Hollywood fame? We humans, the world over, seem to love a good story about a child overcoming this form of adversity only to rise to greatness. The Torah is emphatically clear that wronging the orphan is a sure way to invite God's wrath. In Exodus chapter 22, God tells us: *You shall not mistreat any widow or orphan child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn...* And the prophet, Hosea, says about God: *In you the orphan finds mercy.*

I've been teaching a unit in my 7th grade religious school class on the many ways the Jewish people have conceived of God over the centuries. One of the things that stands out when you look at how our biblical ancestors described God's attributes is that God cares especially for the poor and the most vulnerable. God feels a special closeness to orphans, it seems. Psalm 68 includes a verse with some striking language about orphans. God is called *avi yitomim*, the father of all orphans. Maybe this explains the intensity of the warning God gives against harming orphans in Exodus 22.

There's something more that Joseph, Moses, and Esther have in common. The three of them are not just orphans who overcome that adversity in their lives – they are, each one of them, cross-cultural navigators, carefully managing their status as Jews in a powerful non-Jewish

¹ Deen, Edith, [All the Women of the Bible](#), p.147.

country. Let's look at Joseph first.

Joseph rises to power in ancient Egypt and is even given an Egyptian name by his adopted nation: **Zaph**-eh-nat Pa-**ney**-ah. He marries the daughter of an Egyptian priest and becomes fluent in the language. When his brothers finally make the journey down to Egypt in order to buy food due to the famine in the land of Canaan, they approach Joseph, but they don't recognize him. His dress, his language, and the name others are calling him all present them with the impression that they are standing face-to-face with a very powerful Egyptian official.

And yet, as Egyptian as Joseph had become, he had to swallow the fact that it was a society that on some level found his people, the Hebrews, disgusting. Genesis 43:32 tells of how the Egyptians wouldn't sit at the same table to eat with Hebrews, because to do so was loathsome to them. At the end of the great story of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph's entire family is invited to move to Egypt and escape the harshness of the famine back in Canaan. One of the first things Joseph does before his brothers are about to be introduced to meet the Pharaoh is coach them on what words to choose in describing themselves and their work. They are, after all, Hebrews, and shepherds to boot – both lower castes of humankind in the Egyptians' racial scheme.

In Moses's case his challenge is to try to draw on his experience being raised in the Pharaoh's court to help persuade the Pharaoh that the time has come to let the Hebrew slaves go. One of his earliest efforts involves him telling the Pharaoh that he should let the Hebrews journey out into the wilderness unsupervised so that they can make sacrificial offerings to their god. Pharaoh responds by saying that they can gather within the land of Egypt and make their sacrifices. Moses counters by saying that the Hebrews' make animal sacrifices of a nature that Egyptians consider disgusting, and that for this reason it is wise for the Pharaoh to let them leave Egypt in order to worship their god. In other words, Moses played the race card.

Let's conclude with a few words about Esther. Like Joseph before her, she is given a name belonging to the culture of the empire in which she, as a Jew, is a member of a religious and ethnic minority. And like Joseph and Moses, she finds herself having to strategize a way to deal with anti-Semitism within her host country. How does she do it? She does it in a way that I find inspiring. First, she figures out how she can play a pivotal role in saving her people by manipulating events based on King Ahasuerus's love for her and Persian court customs. But for her to carry out this plan will take courage – she will have to risk the death penalty and appear before the king uninvited. She and her cousin, Mordechai, both know that this is the destiny she was born to, and that she must somehow take this risk. Before she does so, she takes some time to gather her spiritual strength and the collective spiritual strength of her people. She secretly has word sent out to the Jews of Persia to fast with her for three days before she risks her life and goes before the king unannounced.

One of the reasons these stories appeal to us in the Jewish community is that they all involve the precarious and uncertain aspects of Jewish survival that we, as a small and widely dispersed – and often despised – people have always had to manage. To be a Jew in the diaspora has

always involved acts of cross-cultural navigation. To be a Jew in much of the world over the past couple thousand years has meant to be grateful for benevolent and tolerant rulers, while also being ready to pack up and leave when things turn sour and the finger of blame is cast against the Jews.

This Purim, may we celebrate the cleverness and brilliance of Queen Esther, with all the revelry and silliness that the holiday demands of us. We're supposed to get so – how shall I put it – cognitively disoriented that we can't tell the difference between the heroes and the villains of the story. I hope that tomorrow night you'll join us as we read from the *megillah*, the scroll of Esther, and regale one another with really ridiculous songs full of extremely bad puns. And to the members of the Temple Beth Israel community who are in Israel this Shabbat, I also wish a fabulous and outrageous Purim.

Shabbat shalom.