IN THE MONTH OF ADAR - WHAT KIND OF HAPPINESS ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

When Adar arrives, we increase our joy."

(Talmud Ta'anit 29a)

The gematria of word 'in joy'[Heb. b'simchah] is the same as that of 'year' [Heb. shanah] This means that the joy that a person is inspired to have at this time will be a source from which he can draw upon himself joy for the whole year. And so it should be God's will. (Rebbe Avraham Yehoshua Heschel of Apt.)

Happiness is...

"The Constitution only gives people the right to pursue happiness. You have to catch it yourself."
-Ben Franklin

"The best way to cheer yourself up is to try to cheer somebody else up."
-Mark Twain

"I have no money, no resources, no hopes. I am the happiest man alive."
-Henry Miller

"Most people would rather be certain they're miserable, than risk being happy."
-Robert Anthony

"Be happy while you're living, for you're a long time dead."
-Scottish Proverb

"Who is happy? The one who is content with what she has."
-Talmud, Pirke Avot

"And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a rob of fine linen and purple; and the city of Shushan shouted and was glad. The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor."

Book of Esther 8:15-16

The Joyous Month of Adar in Kabbalah

from the Gal Einai Institute of Israel http://www.inner.org/index.htm

According to Sefer Yetzirah, each month of the Jewish year has a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, a zodiac sign, one of the twelve tribes of Israel, a sense, and a controlling limb of the body that correspond to it.

A*dar* is the twelfth month of the Jewish calendar.

The word *Adar* is cognate to the Hebrew *adir*, meaning "strength." *Adar* is the month of good fortune for the Jewish people. Our sages say of *Adar*: "Its *mazal* [fortune] is strong."

Purim, the holiday of *Adar*, commemorates the "metamorphosis" of the Jews' apparent bad fortune (as it appeared to Hamen) to good. "When *Adar* enters we increase in joy." The festival of *Purim* marks the high point in the joy of the entire year. The Jewish year begins with the joy of the redemption of *Pesach* and concludes with the joy of the redemption of *Purim*. **"Joy breaks through all barriers."**

The joy of *Adar* is what makes the month of Adar the "pregnant" month of the year (i.e., seven of the nineteen yearsin the cycle of the Jewish calender are "leap years," "pregnant" with an additional month of *Adar*). When there are two *Adars*, *Purim* is celebrated in the second *Adar*, in order to link the redemption of *Purim* to the redemption of *Pesach*. Thus we see that the secret of *Adar* and *Purim* is "the end is wedged in the beginning."

- **Letter**: *kuf*.

The letter *kuf* means "monkey" (*kof*), the symbol of laughter of the month of *Adar*. In accordance with the idiom "as a monkey in the face of man," the *kuf* also symbolizes masquerade, an accepted custom of *Purim*. Before the miracle of *Purim*, G-d Himself "hid His face" from His children Israel (in the entire story of *Purim*, as related in the book of Esther, His Name does not appear even once). By initially hiding one's true identity, pretending to be someone else, the innermost essence of one's true self becomes revealed. On *Purim* we reach the level of the "unknowable head" ("the head that does not know itself nor is known to others"), the state of total existential hiddeness of self from self, for the sake of "giving birth" to one's ultimate self anew.

The word "*kuf*" also means the "eye of a needle." Our sages teach us that even in the most irrational dream one cannot see an elephant passing through the eye of a needle. Yet, on *Purim* one experiences this great wonder, which, in Kabbalah symbolizes the truly infinite essence of G-d's transcendent light entering into the finite context of physical reality and revealing itself in full to the Jewish soul.

- ***Mazal (sign)***: *dagim* (Pisces-fish).

Fish are the creatures of the "hidden world" (the sea). So are the souls of Israel "fish" that swim in the waters of the Torah. The true identity and fortune of Israel is invisible in this world. The revelation of *Purim*, the revelation of Israel's true identity, reflects the revelation of the world to come (the miracle of *Purim* is understood to reflect in this world the ultimate miracle: the resurrection in the world to come). The word "*dag*" (the singular of "*dagim*") is interpreted to represent the "*tikkun*" (rectification) of *da'ag*--"to worry." In the Bible, the word for fish--*dag*--actually appears once written as *da'ag*: In the time of Nechemiah, certain unobservant Jews desecrated the holiness of the Shabbat by selling fish in the market of Jerusalem. Their "fish" had turned into excessive "worry" over earning a livelihood. In the opposite direction, the fish of the joy of *Purim*, the strong (though initially hidden, as fish) *mazal* of *Adar*, convert all the worry in the heart of man to the ultimate joy of redemption with the new birth of self from the "unknowable head."

- **Tribe**: Naftali.

In Kabbalah, the name Naftali is read (as two words): *nofet li*, "sweetness is to me." The *mitzvah* on *Purim* to reach the level of the "unknowable head" by drinking wine etc., is expressed, in the words of our sages, as: "one is obligated on *Purim* to become sweet, until he is unable to differentiate between 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordechai.'"

Megillah 16b:8

§ The Gemara returns to its explanation of the Megilla. The verse states: ***"The Jews had light and gladness, and joy and honor"*** *(Esther 8:16).* ***Rav Yehuda said: "Light"; this*** *is referring to the* ***Torah*** *that they once again studied.* ***And similarly it says: "For the mitzva is a lamp and the Torah is light"*** *(Proverbs 6:23).* ***"Gladness" [simḥa]; this*** *is referring to* ***the Festivals*** *that they once again observed.* ***And similarly it says: "And you shall be glad [vesamakhta] on your Festival"*** *(Deuteronomy 16:14).* ***"Joy" [sasson]; this*** *is referring to* ***circumcision,*** *as they once again circumcised their sons.* ***And similarly it says: "I rejoice [sas] at Your word"*** *(Psalms 119:162), which the Sages understood as referring to David's rejoicing over the mitzva of circumcision.*

Purim The Joy of Adar - Rabbi Aba Wagensburg

We are told that just as Adar begins we are to increase our level of joy (Ta'anit 29a). Why does this mitzva take effect at the beginning of the month and not just on Purim itself?

B'ezrat Hashem, through gaining an insight into the nature of the month of Adar, we will be privy to a new dimension of how to facilitate profound joy in our own lives.

The Meor Einayim (by Rabbi Menachem Nachum, the Chernobyler Rebbe) suggests that we can see the meaning of Adar through its three letters, aleph, dalet, and reish. Aleph, the first letter in the alphabet, also has the numerical value of one, hinting to Hashem. The dalet and raysh together form the word dar, which means to dwell amongst us. I was thinking also that if you take the word dar and spell it backwards, you get the word reid, which means come down. Putting all the letters back together, we can see that Adar means that the One G-d will come down to dwell amongst us. The Sfat Emet echoes this idea, saying that Adar should really be pronounced E'dor, or I will dwell amongst you.

Adar is the month of spreading G-d's sanctity in this world. How did this come to be?

The Gemora in Megilla (13b) says that when Haman cast his lot to see which month was the best to destroy the Jews, he was elated that it fell on Adar because that was the month in which Moshe Rabbeinu died; but little did he know that Moshe was also born on the 7th of Adar. The standard understanding of this passage is that even though Moshe died on the 7th of Adar, nevertheless 120 years earlier he was born on the same date. However, let's look further into this to get a deeper understanding.

The Tikuney Zohar (69,112) says that Moshe Rabbeinu's sanctity spreads throughout every generation. The Meor Einayim explains this to mean that every single Jew has a spark of Moshe Rabbeinu in them, and through that spark we have the ability to understand the Torah. Thus Moshe Rabbeinu remains the eternal lawgiver to every generation.

Furthermore, the Sfat Emet explains that Moshe is called an "Ish Elokim," a man of G-d, (Divrei Hayamim 1, 23:14) because he had a G-dly quality. Just as Hashem is a mashpia, or one who gives influence, so is Moshe, as we find in the Gemora (Bava Batra 75a) where Moshe is compared to the sun, and Yehoshua to the moon, the classical giver/receiver relationship Don't think that Moshe was born this way. Rather, he worked at it to the point where on the top of Mount Sinai he assumed this new role of mashpia. That's why he was up there for 40 days and 40 nights. Why that specific amount of time? Says the Sfat

Emet that this is the length of time it takes for an embryo to develop into its first form; Moshe literally received a new form after those 40 days, and this new form was based purely on giving and sharing the sanctity of Hashem to others. That's why it says, "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe" (Devarim 33:4), literally, "The Torah that Moshe commanded us." The acronym of "tzivah lanu Moshe" spells the word "Tzelem," or image. This means that Moshe received his new image, and that image imbues all of us today with sanctity.

The Sfat Emet points out that numerically, Moshe Rabbeinu equals 613, the total of all the mitzvot in the Torah. This means that Moshe spreads the Torah's sanctity into our 365 sinews and 248 limbs. We can now re-read the verse "Torah tzivah lanu Moshe, morasha kihilat Ya'akov (Devarim 33:4)." In pshat this translates as "Moshe commanded us the Torah; it is an inheritance to the congregations of Ya'akov." But according to the Sfat Emet, there is a deeper layer; Moshe Rabbeinu not only commanded us the Torah, he's also responsible for the power of inheritance. Only Moshe had the ability to spread the sanctity of the Torah.

Based on this theme, we can understand a different idea in Pirke Avot (4,4), where we are charged to be exceedingly humble. One could ask, "How? I thought only Moshe was capable of such humility, as it says 'Moshe is the most humble of all people. (Bamidbar 12:3)'" The answer is that since we all have that piece of Moshe inside us, we all have access to that level of humility. Based on all this, we can proceed on to a real eyebrow-raiser!

When it says, "And nobody knows the burial place of Moshe," (Devarim 34:6) the reason is, according to the Meor Einayim, because there is no burial place of Moshe, because Moshe is "buried" in each and every one of us. Moshe, as it were, came down into you and I. Thus, when Hashem says to Moshe "Leich reid"(Shemot 32:7) or go down, this is synonymous with the way in which Hashem comes down to us, as we saw above hinted to in the word Adar. Just like the One comes down to dwell amongst us, so it is with Moshe.

Subsequently, we have a deeper insight into the Gemora quoted above that discussed Haman's joy with the planned annihilation of the Jews during Adar. Haman knew that Moshe died in Adar, and because of this he mistakenly thought that the Jews no longer had the ability to spread the sanctity of Hashem or the Torah. But the Gemora tells us that little did Haman know that even though Moshe died on the 7th of Adar, nevertheless he also was born on the 7th of Adar. The Gemora does not only tell us that 120 years prior to his death was he born (the conventional understanding), but it also teaches that right after he died he was immediately born again into the Bnei Yisrael. This means that we still maintain the power to spread sanctity, and thus are not subject to the impure motives of Haman and his followers.

This is the function of Adar: to imbue sanctity into every dor, or generation (another take on the word Adar). We can now appreciate why we begin to increase joy from the beginning of the Month of Adar, instead of the 14th or 15th. It is now, at the beginning of the month, that Hashem begins to descend into our world. The high level of closeness to Hashem we experience in Adar is truly a reason to be filled with simcha from the beginning of the month.

As we wait for the current events to pan out, may we truly have reason to be happy this Adar by witnessing G-d coming down to dwell amongst us in the Beit HaMikdash, Amen.
https://darchenoam.org/purim-the-joy-of-adar/

ORTHODOX UNION

PURIM

Adar, Purim and the Joy of Being a Jew

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As Adar Begins ...

One of the most beloved of all our *halachot* is, "*When Adar arrives, we increase simcha, joy.*" Without a doubt, there is a unique quality to the joy of Adar, and many feel the simcha of Purim has a special, vibrant character all its own. What is this special Purim simcha? What is it's deeper, underlying meaning?

Perhaps we can say that what's unique about this simcha is that it's not the outgrowth of anything specific. As a rule, joy results from receiving or achieving something. That something could be financial, educational, professional, personal or spiritual. Whatever the case, the joy is a result of time and effort invested and the sense of achievement and accomplishment.

Purim, on the other hand, simply *is* joyous. The intrinsic fabric of Adar and Purim is simcha. There is a unique potential within Purim known as *v'nohafech hu*: the ability to suddenly see things from a totally new, fresh, and different perspective. The simcha of Purim doesn't come from this or that achievement, rather—*v'nohafech hu*—the potential for achievement is an outgrowth of the inner joy of Purim, of the sheer fact that we are infused with the vital energy of simcha that naturally opens our eyes to whole new realities, and the potential and possibility for new achievements.

From Where?

And where does this unique simcha come from? From the essence of life itself. For indeed, our very existence itself is the source of simcha. Literally, just like the sun naturally radiates it's light, life naturally radiates joy. To feel and experience simcha is to experience life and what flows from it. So long as we don't cloud and suppress our essential connection to life, and as long as we allow our connection to life to flow, then simcha will be a natural state of being.

Isn't that what we see in children? Simply full of life, and simply and naturally joyful. And why is that? Because their lives are uncomplicated, because there is nothing standing between them, and life; nothing that stymies their connection to the basic vitality of life, of living, of being

alive. Their innocence and simplicity, their innate integrity and purity, necessarily fill them with a feeling of joy and happiness. From this we can understand that simcha and the richness it brings to life is actually the natural extension of simply embracing and appreciating the great gift of life itself.

Life

When we realize that the essence of existence is existence itself, it becomes clear that everything that might try to cloud our vision and appreciation pales in the face of life itself. Indeed, we can see this clearly when we contrast life with it's opposite. When there is a threat to our lives, suddenly it's crystal clear how the value of life towers over everything else. Suddenly, when there is a threat—when Amalek rears it's threatening head—everything else is thrown into clear proportion and perspective. The threat to life drives home the incalculable preciousness of life, and when the threat passes, simcha floods in; the pure joy of life itself rushes to the surface.

Imagine a parent and child whose relationship has been ruptured, seemingly, past the point of repair. Suddenly there is a threat to the child's life, and in that moment of existential threat, everything that drove the two apart falls by the wayside. In a moment, pure love rushes to the fore. And then, when the threat passes, all that remains in their hearts is pure, unconditional, parent-child love. All those issues and complications that came between them are deflated by that near-death, then back-to-life experience. Despite the fact that the potential for seeing and feeling that innate love was always present, unfortunately, mere trivialities—in comparison to life itself—were allowed to insinuate themselves into the picture and to erect seemingly insurmountable barriers.

Amalek

Amalek hates the Jewish nation, hates the very fact of our existence. Amalek couldn't care less what we do or don't do, he just wants us gone, dead. In Germany, we met this towering monster face-to-face. Amalek's brutal, relentless opposition to our very existence is a response to the *ohr*, the light, that radiates from our lives, from the simple fact of our being a living, breathing presence in the world. Like nocturnal, darkness-dwelling bats that can't tolerate the presence of light, Amalek can't tolerate the presence of Am Yisrael. The fact that Amalek strove to eradicate any and every Jew, regardless of what type of life they lived or didn't live, tells us that what Amalek couldn't tolerate was *us*: our presence, our existence, our simply being alive at all.

Life Highlights Light

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In Persia, when the genocidal threat of Amalek was vanquished, what suddenly became crystal clear was the pure, simple preciousness of Jewish existence: the existence of every Jew, and of the Jewish people. Amalek wanted to utterly extinguish the light of our existence, and through that failure, we came to see the pure beauty and brilliance of the light that had been so terribly threatened with extinction. That *ohr*, that inherent Divine light that is the essential fabric of our being, isn't the product of something we acquired or achieved: it's just us, pure and simple; simply the *light* of life, of Jewish existence.

Connection to that essential soul-*light* of life naturally fills us with strength and vitality, naturally drives despair away, and clears the way for a streaming flow of life to fill our hearts with hope, ambition, dreams and simcha. On Purim we learn to be overjoyed simply with being who we are; the living, breathing nation of Israel and all that entails. And, we learn to laugh at all the pettiness that gets between us, and us: that pulls our focus to what we aren't instead of what we simply *are*: Jews, Am Yisrael.

In Adar, and on Purim, the holy, spiritual essence of our souls—the truest, purest reality of our existence—bursts into clear view and fills our hearts with the remarkable light of simcha. Just like our vile enemy, blind to any other consideration, hunted every Jew simply for the fact of he or she was a Jew, the opposite is also true. *V'nohafech hu*, the joyous *ohr* of Purim takes hold of every Jew, no questions asked, just because he is a living, breathing Jew. This experience, this reality, connects us to life, to our existence as Jews, and to our innate *kedusha*-sanctity.

This is the *sōd*, the deep, beneath the surface reality that is the powerful inner force of Purim. This is the underlying secret of the remarkable joy that is present on Purim, and that seeps into every nook and cranny of our being. It's not a coincidence that Purim is thirty days before Passover, the day of our freedom, of our liberation to be ourselves, and not the slaves of another. The power of Purim bestows upon us the abilities and capabilities to be ourselves, to be liberated Jews, and to be free of any force that dares to stand between us, and ourselves; between us and life, Jewish life.

The joy – the simcha! – of being a Jew.

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FROM JPS COMMENTARY ON ESTHER

What do we know about the origin of Purim? Because of the similarity between Purim and other ancient carnival-like festivals and/or festivals occurring around the same time of the year—near the vernal equinox or near the end of the calendar year (the Babylonian and Persian year ended in Adar)—scholars have attempted to discover the origin of Purim in one or another of these ancient festivals.[52] Because the Book of Esther is set in Persia, many scholars have looked to Persia for Purim's origin, finding it in the Persian Farvardigan, the Festival of the Dead (whose name sounds somewhat like "Purim"), or in the Persian New Year. Other scholars preferred Babylonia as the place of origin, because of the large Jewish community living in Babylonia during the Persian period, because the term *pur,* "lot," whence "Purim," derives from Babylonian, and because it had been popular to associate the names of Esther and Mordecai with the Babylonian deities Ishtar and Marduk. A Greek origin had also been proposed by H. Grätz in 1886 but was rejected by Paton in 1908 and was never considered seriously again.[53] A Greek origin, however, may be no less likely than any other, especially given the fact that the Book of Esther has in common with Greek literature its use of many motifs and a comic form. The Greeks had a festival called the City or Great Dionysia, which took place in March-April for four days (later three days). The festival was the occasion for the tasting of new wine, revelry, and masquerading, and beginning in 486 B.C.E. included the performance of comedies (the Greek word *komos,* from which "comedy" derives, means "revel, a riotous celebration"). The actors in these comedies wore grotesque masks and phallic appendages, and the dancers had deliberately vulgar choreography.[54]

All of these possible origins are suggestive, but none is provable. There were many late winter or early spring holidays, some of them carnivalesque, in the ancient world as in the modern one (compare Mardi Gras), and one or more of them may have been adopted by Jews and, in the course of time, become a Jewish festival.

Rather than speculate on Purim's pagan origin, we might do better to ask: When did Purim become a *Jewish* holiday? Unfortunately, this question is no easier to answer because our sources for Jewish life during the Persian period are meager. The dating of the observance of Purim is obviously related to the date of the Book of Esther (ca. 400–200 B.C.E.) and to the date of its canonization (perhaps as early as the second century B.C.E.), for the book would not have been written in its current form or preserved without the popular acceptance of Purim. This suggests that Purim was being celebrated by around the third century B.C.E., but we have no evidence to confirm it.

We have firm evidence for the Jewish observance of Purim in the Hellenistic period. Our earliest reference is in 2 Macc. 15:36 (written 104–63 B.C.E.), which mentions "the day of Mordecai" on 14 Adar. A second piece of evidence is the colophon to the Septuagint Esther, which reads: "In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and a Levite [or: priest, and Levitas], and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the preceding Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and had been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem." The Ptolemy and Cleopatra referred to are usually dated to 114–113 B.C.E. or to 78–77 B.C.E.[55]

By around the end of the second century B.C.E. we can speak of the Jewish celebration of Purim in the Land of Israel (although not at Qumran) and in Egypt. We are still left with a gap between the Book of Esther's putative origin of Purim in Susa at the time of Xerxes (fifth century B.C.E.), and even between my third century B.C.E. estimate of its origin, and its documented observance several centuries later in communities far to the west. By the Roman period, the time of our rabbinic sources, Purim was firmly entrenched. *Megillat Ta'anit,* a first century C.E. tannaitic work containing a list of the days on which fasting is prohibited, lists 14 and 15 Adar as Purim. Later rabbinic sources, especially the Mishnah and the Gemara, provide many details about the observance of Purim and we can conclude that by the early centuries C.E. Purim was firmly established in rabbinic Judaism.

The name "Purim" calls for comment. This is the name that the Book of Esther uses, although the reason for the name—after Haman's casting of a lot (3:7; 9:24)—seems forced because the casting of the lot is not central to the plot of the story. This is more likely a "false etymology" of the type common in the Bible, in which the similarity of sounds is used to link a name with an explanation in the accompanying narrative (for example, Moses' name in Exod. 2:10). This has led some scholars to propose other derivations for the word "Purim" but they are not convincing. The reference in 2 Macc. 15:36 calls the holiday "the day of Mordecai" and does not mention "Purim." The Greek versions use terms that sound like "Purim" but are not identical with it: the Septuagint 9:26–29 calls it *phrourai* ("guards"), echoed also in Josephus, and the Alpha-text (another Greek version of Esther; see below, "The Greek Versions and Josephus") uses *phourdaia.*[56] All this suggests early uncertainty about the name of the holiday. Rabbinic texts, beginning with *Megillat Ta'anit,* use "Purim."

There is also uncertainty about the date of Purim, even in the Book of Esther itself, or at least about where it was celebrated on 14 Adar and on 15 Adar. Chapter 9 recounts a second day of fighting in Shushan, which was most likely added to the story to account for the fact that the holiday was observed there on 15 Adar, and on 14 Adar everywhere else (9:17–18). But then 9:19 assigns 14 Adar to Jews of unwalled towns, implying that Jews of all walled cities observed the holiday on 15 Adar (as was the practice as defined by the later rabbinic literature). The Septuagint has the Jews of Susa congregating on 14 Adar but celebrating on 15 Adar, and the Jews of the countryside (that is, outside of Susa) celebrating on 14 Adar. Earlier, in 3:7, the Septuagint has Haman's lot fall on 14 Adar, instead of 13 Adar.[57] The Alpha-text records the dates for Phourdaia as 14 and 15 Adar, without explaining that there was a different date for different locations. It is reasonable to conclude from this confusion that Purim originally may have been celebrated on 14 Adar in some communities and on 15 Adar in others, and that the Book of Esther is trying to justify and regularize this practice.

The essential features specific to the observance of Purim, as described in rabbinic sources, are the reading of the *Megillah*, the Purim banquet, the sending of gifts, and the giving of gifts to the poor. The last three are specified in the *Megillah* itself. And, while the *Megillah* does not state that it should be read, its reading has become the

centerpiece of the observance of Purim. M. Fox has a wonderful explanation for why this is so.

> The public reading of the Scroll is not ordained in the book itself, yet the reading is rooted in the book's ideology. The only festival practice the author envisaged was festivities which replicate the Jews' rejoicing of year 12 [the time of the events of chapters 8 and 9]. The Jews of subsequent generations, rather than commemorating something that happened to their ancestors, celebrate their ancestors' *experience*.... It was an accurate extension of the author's intention when the rabbis took an imperative implicit in the text—"read me"—and made that the prime commandment of the festival.[58]

The tone of the Purim celebration—the boisterousness and frivolity of a topsy-turvy world—is captured in the talmudic statement that on Purim one should get so drunk that he can no longer distinguish between "Cursed be Haman" and "Blessed be Mordecai" (B. Megillah 7b). This tone, like the reading of the scroll, stems from the tone of the book itself; and, indeed, many of the components of the celebration of Purim derive from the story. Not only do we re-enact the rejoicing of the Jews of Persia, as Fox so well put it, but we re-enact the book in a broader sense. We do so in a literal way through Purim skits and plays. No less an enactment of the story, we eat and drink and carouse on Purim just as Ahasuerus did in his royal court. As for masquerades, they are at home in other carnivalesque occasions (e.g., Halloween and Mardi Gras), but they are also a natural outgrowth of the Book of Esther, where we find Mordecai's changes in costume—from wearing sackcloth, to being arrayed in the king's robe, to dressing in his own multicolored royal outfit—and the theme of concealed and confused identities (Esther's Jewishness is concealed, Haman thinks he is the man the king will honor). In celebrating Purim we relive the carnivalesque aspects of the book. The ways of observing Purim begin with and derive from the Book of Esther.[59]

Purim shares many features with other carnival holidays (Halloween, Mardi Gras, April Fool's Day, and New Year's Day in the United States and Yom ha-'Atzma'ut [Israeli Independence Day] in Israel). These carnival days differ one from the other, but in all of them there is a certain gaiety, levity, and disregard for norms of propriety. In his discussion of Purim, H. Fisch opines that it is not an actual carnival but a symbolic carnival.[60] J. Rubenstein, using the anthropological model of Victor Turner, concludes that Purim is a time of liminality, an "in-between" time when the normal structures of society do not pertain. Both of these scholars sense that in Purim, and, we might add, in other carnival celebrations as well, there is not a complete breakdown or reversal of norms (as many discussions of carnival would have it), but a symbolic or partial reversal of norms. To me this signifies the *miming* of a reversal, imitating or pretending to turn society's norms on their head, knowing all the while that it is just pretend. In carnival the world of make-believe takes the place of the real world. Costumes and masks, excessive drink, noise, rowdiness, and even (mock) violence are some of the common manifestations that symbolize both the aura of make-believe and the permissible reversing of the rules of society. It may not be unreasonable to suggest that the manner in which *dat,* "rule, law, custom," is constantly being called upon in the

Book of Esther is another sign of the carnivalesque spirit of the book, for the rules are themselves capricious and silly, their publication is exaggerated, and immutable laws are easily changed. True, the motif of law is at home in all types of storytelling about Persia, but it is additionally useful here, in the world of carnival, where law is disregarded and custom is flouted. It is not the Persians that are being made fun of; it is the rule of law. Inscribed in the book is the idea that rules are meant to be broken.

The type of psychological release that is accomplished by carnival and that is embodied in Esther and in Purim, as well as the plot of the book in which the Jews overcome their enemies, lends itself to other occasions when a celebration of community survival was called for. Various Jewish communities during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period instituted a *Purim katan,* "a minor Purim," imitating the observance of Purim on a date that commemorates their deliverance from destruction.[61]

The Greek Versions and Josephus

Esther presents us with an unusual opportunity to study the early growth and interpretation of a biblical story. In addition to the Masoretic Text (the accepted Hebrew text of the Bible), two Greek versions of the story survive: the version preserved in the Septuagint, also known as the B-text, and a shorter Greek version, known as the Alpha-text or A-text (sometimes referred to as the Lucianic recension, or L).

Current scholarly interest in Jewish literature of the Greco-Roman period and in the history of biblical interpretation has spurred a number of recent studies of the Greek versions and comparisons of the two Greek versions with each other and with the Masoretic Text.[62] These studies shed light on what the basic outlines of the earliest form of the story might have been before it reached the form in which we have it in the Masoretic Text, and how the story was reshaped in its different textual versions. The complicated textual development that produced the three extant versions need not occupy us here. Our concern is the Masoretic Text, so we need to understand that this text was probably based on a Hebrew story that has not been preserved but that was similar to our Hebrew Esther. In its pre-Masoretic form, it was not the story of the origin of Purim; the emphasis on Purim was added by the author of the Masoretic Text, who reshaped the story as an etiology for Purim. We do not know whether the original Hebrew story contained religious language. Some people think that it did, and that the author of the Masoretic Text took out the references to God and religious observance. Others think that the original story lacked religious language and that it was added only later, by the author of the Septuagint. In either case, the absence of religious language in the Masoretic Text is completely appropriate, if not absolutely necessary, given that it is a farce associated with a carnivalesque occasion.

The major differences between the Masoretic Text and the Greek versions are the six Additions. These Additions were once an integral part of the Septuagint but when Jerome (fourth century C.E.) translated the Greek Bible into Latin (the Vulgate), he

CHAPTER 1

Wine and Women

Chapter 1 serves as the prologue to the story. A prologue is not part of the main plot or action, but it is certainly part of the story and is essential for setting the scene and motivating the plot. Chapter 1 sets the tone of the book, and it is a tone of excess, buffoonery, and bawdiness. It portrays the Persian court in all its decadent lavishness, and, with a hint of mockery so at home in burlesque, it paints a picture of a bumbling king and his overly ambitious courtiers. Most important, it paves the way for Esther's entrance into the story through the Vashti incident.

Chapter 1 also foreshadows the types of actions and reactions that will figure prominently in the main plot. The scene in which the king is so easily persuaded to issue a ridiculous edict, published posthaste, prepares us for the main plot, when we again see the king casually giving approval for an unreasonable edict against the Jews and revving up his extensive communications network to publicize it. A sense of this chapter's foreshadowing, and also of the reversals on which the plot is constructed, is neatly encapsulated in the midrashic identification of "that Ahasuerus" (1:1):

> Ahasuerus who put his wife [Vashti] to death on account of his friend [Memucan, who is identified with Haman], is the same Ahasuerus who put his friend [Haman] to death on account of his wife [Esther]. (Esther Rabbah 1.1 and Targum Sheni)

Wine: Party Time in Persia (vv. 1:1–8)

Through elaborate description of detail, the reader is taken into the Persian court, known in the ancient world for its opulence. After the notice of the time and place, the description moves to the banquets, whose main purpose seems to have been, as far as our story is concerned, to provide an opportunity for the king to display his wealth. We are apprised of the guest list and shown the banquet hall. The description of the hall is a marvel of texture and color, as it guides the reader's eyes from ceiling to floor: draperies and columns, couches, and mosaic floor, all of the finest materials. Then the narrative focuses on the drinking vessels—the Persian equivalent of china and crystal—equally exquisite. From the drinking vessels it is but a small step to the wine, and here we move closer to the action, for it was when he was happy with wine that the king gave the order that set in motion the events of the story.

The description of the setting is atypical of biblical narrative, not because the Bible lacks physical descriptions, but because it does not generally use them to set a scene. Descriptions like those of Solomon's Temple and Ezekiel's vision of the "chariot," which bear some similarities to our passage, constitute main narratives, not introductions to main narratives. The Temple is described in 1 Kings 6–7 step by step as it was built because the narrative is about the building of the Temple. Similarly, the prophet's vision is the main topic of Ezekiel 1 and vividly recounts Ezekiel's first prophetic experience.

The opening description in Esther is more typical of late biblical and apocryphal books of the Persian and Greek periods, and of some Greek romances from a slightly later period (which often describe banquet scenes). It may be compared with the opening of the Book of Judith, which also begins with a notice of the regnal date and proceeds to a detailed description, replete with measurements, of the fortifications of Ecbatana.

As in Judith, the description in Esther contains many numbers—perhaps more than one would expect: the number of provinces and the number of days of each banquet. At first, these numbers may seem to lend a sense of historical precision, but upon reflection they appear inflated and may be more accurately interpreted as contributing to the tone of excess and exaggeration that permeates the chapter. Their placement at the ends of their verses (in the Hebrew) emphasizes their magnitude. The language of the chapter, heavy with duplication, interrupting and turning back on itself, adds to the desired effect of excess.

The decor that makes an impression on the reader of Esther is very similar to the Persian accoutrements that impressed the classical authors. They speak often of gold and silver furniture and furnishings, sometimes ornamented with gems, and cups of gold and silver. Horse trappings, weapons, and armor were also gold or gilded. What most impressed the classical authors was the Persian textiles, many of which the Persians themselves considered valuable enough to be kept in the royal treasuries.[1] The classical authors mention, among other objects, purple-dyed rugs; hangings embroidered with gold thread; hangings with animal patterns; purple garments with gold embroidery; garments studded with jewels or gold beads; and brilliantly colored clothing.

The Greeks were also impressed by Persian banquets, which were in their eyes one of the outstanding traits of Persian social life that stood in marked contrast to Greek life. Greek descriptions of these banquets are quite similar to the Book of Esther's, with an emphasis on the quantity and luxury of the dinnerware and the food and drink consumed (they mention glass vessels in addition to gold and silver ones, and a variety of meats).

Persian banquets had a precedent in Assyrian banquets, one of which is described in an inscription of Ashurnasirpal II. From it we see that Ahasuerus was not the only king to indulge in big parties. On the occasion of the dedication of his palace at Calah, Ashurnasirpal II made a banquet consisting of large amounts of meat, fowl, fish, eggs, bread, beer, vegetables, condiments, and other delicacies (described in detail, with the quantities noted). He goes on to say:

> I treated for ten days with food and drink 47,074 persons, men and women, who were bid to come from across my entire country, (also) 5,000 important persons, delegates from the country Suhu . . . 16,000 inhabitants of Calah from all ways of life, 1,500 officials of all my palaces, altogether 69,574 invited guests from all the . . . countries including the people of Calah. I provided them with the means to clean and anoint themselves. I did them due honors and sent them back, healthy and happy, to their own countries.[2]

Persian banquets are more than just fancy dinner parties. By virtue of their large guest lists, menus, and furnishings, they represent the diversity of the empire, its wealth, and the king's control over it. The king's table was supplied by food from provinces throughout the empire, as a form of gift or tribute (in Greek texts, banquets and tribute are mentioned side by side). Not all the food was eaten at the dinner; large quantities were given to the guests to take home, or were distributed to the army and officials as a form of payment. In this way, tribute from the provinces was redistributed. The royal banquet, then, was an important economic and political institution.[3] Satraps and governors had similar banquets in their home provinces. Compare Neh. 5:14–18.

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8 That very day King Ahasuerus gave the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther. Mordecai presented himself to the king,

ח בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא נָתַן הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ
לְאֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה אֶת־בֵּית הָמָן צֹרֵר
הַיְּהוּדִים וּמָרְדֳּכַי בָּא לִפְנֵי
הַמֶּלֶךְ כִּי־הִגִּידָה אֶסְתֵּר מַה הוּא־לָהּ׃

CHAPTER 8

A Reversal of Fortunes

Haman is gone but his edict against the Jews is still in force. Now the second stage of Esther's mission must be accomplished: to save the Jews from destruction. Since a royal edict cannot, according to our story, be revoked, it must be neutralized with another one, equally binding. It is here that Esther and Mordecai, working together publicly for the first time, show themselves to be the heroes of the story. Through their agency, a new edict is written that effectively cancels out the former one. While we hear of the Jewish and some of the non-Jewish reaction to the publication of the new edict, the discharging of its stipulations does not occur until chapter 9.

Chapter 8 is a chapter of reversals, and will replay, with significant changes, some of the motifs and actions from earlier in the story. Esther will again make a request to the king and plead for her people. Again, the king will elevate a man and bestow upon him the power to write a royal edict. Again, an edict will be sent posthaste throughout the empire, an edict with reverse stipulations in similar language to the first one, and equally irrevocable. Again, the edict will provoke a reaction in the city of Shushan; and again the Jews throughout the empire will greet it with a public response, this time with joy instead of with mourning.

As noted by modern commentators and medieval Jewish exegetes, much of the language and many of the details of chapter 8 parallel those of Haman's edict and its publication in chapter 3.[1] This is not surprising in a story so artfully structured, with its symmetries and its inversions. The large number of similarities between the two chapters provides the background against which the differences stand out. I will highlight many of these differences in the Commentary. In general, chapter 8 contains more description and detail, with the effect of making the new edict more important and more urgent than the old one, and showing Mordecai in higher esteem than Haman had been.

1. Haman has been dispatched, and publicly shamed by impalement. One last ignominy occurs here: his property, which reverts to the crown, is turned over to his nemesis. For impalement followed by the confiscation of property see Ezra 6:11: "I also issue an order that whoever alters this decree shall have a beam removed from his house, and he shall be impaled on it and his house confiscated [or: destroyed]." Herodotus 3.129 also records the seizure of a traitor's property.

That very day The king lost no time in following up on the punishment of the villain and on the rewarding of the heroes. The actual time and place of the events in these verses is vague. We do not know if the royal couple is still in the banquet room when Esther repeats her plea to Ahasuerus (v. 3).

Haman's impalement has two immediate consequences: his estate is given to Esther, and Mordecai comes into the presence of Ahasuerus. That is, Mordecai begins to take the place of Haman. This replacement of Haman becomes more explicit in verse 2.

15 Mordecai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the

15 וּמָרְדֳּכַי יָצָא ׀ מִלִּפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בִּלְבוּשׁ
מַלְכוּת תְּכֵלֶת וְחוּר וַעֲטֶרֶת זָהָב גְּדוֹלָה
וְתַכְרִיךְ בּוּץ וְאַרְגָּמָן וְהָעִיר שׁוּשָׁן צָהֲלָה

When the soldiers heard these words, they let their spears fall to the ground, and Bagaeus could see that they were obeying the letters' command so far. This encouraged him, and he gave the secretary the last of his letters, which read: "King Darius orders the Persians in Sardis to kill Oroetes." At these words the guardsmen drew their *akinakeis* and killed him on the spot.

In Herodotus, as in Esther, letters are written and sealed with the king's seal, delivered to distant parts of the empire, and, because their authority is so highly respected, they give rise to killing with no further explanation.

15. royal robes of blue and white... Mordecai's outfit reminds us of both Joseph and Daniel, two other Jewish courtiers who achieved high standing in foreign courts. Joseph's royal investiture is described in Gen. 41: 42: "And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck." Daniel is clothed in purple and has a gold chain placed around his neck, signifying that he rules as one of three in the kingdom (Dan. 5:7, 29). The colorful textiles of Mordecai's costume also recall the hangings of the party scene in 1:6. Mordecai has, indeed, become a royal personage in the court, and is dressed in the typical fashion of the Persian court.

We might have expected this description in verse 1 or 2, when Mordecai enters the king's presence, but its occurrence here serves the larger picture of reversal. After Haman's edict, Mordecai dressed in mourning garb (4:1); after Mordecai's own edict he dresses in royal splendor. Moreover, with the writing of his own edict, Mordecai becomes a permanent and highly-placed royal official, second to the king, as we learn in 10:3.

The word *takhrikh,* "mantle," is a Late Biblical Hebrew term. It later becomes limited to the mantle for the dead, or shroud.

a crown of gold The Hebrew is *ʿatarah,* an older term, not *keter* as in 1:11 and 6:8. Perhaps this is to tell us that, unlike Haman, Mordecai does not wish to be king.

the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries At the end of chapter 3, the city of Shushan was dumbfounded by the news of the decree against the Jews. Now, when the decree is reversed, the city of Shushan is joyous. This is both a reversal of 3:15 and an embodiment of Prov. 11:10: "When the righteous prosper the city exults; When the wicked perish there are shouts of joy."

Compare Herodotus 8.98–99, which also recounts the sending of messages via the Persian post, described in detail, and the reactions in Susa to the messages. In this case, there was first a message of victory followed by a message of defeat.

> At the same time, Xerxes also dispatched a messenger to Persia with news of their defeat. There is nothing mortal that is faster than the system the Persians have devised for sending messages. Apparently, they have horses and men posted at intervals along the route, the same number in total as the overall length in days of the journey, with a fresh horse and rider for every day of travel. Whatever the conditions—it may be snowing, raining, blazing hot, or dark—they never fail to complete their assigned journey in the fastest possible time. The first man passes his instructions on to the second, the second to the third, and so on, in the same kind of relay found in Greece in the torch-race which is run during the festival

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city of Shushan rang with joyous cries. 16 The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor. 17 And in every province and in every city, when the king's command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed

וְשִׂמְחָה׃ 16 לַיְהוּדִים הָיְתָה אוֹרָה
וְשִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשֹׂן וְיֵקָר׃ 17 וּבְכָל־מְדִינָה
וּמְדִינָה וּבְכָל־עִיר וָעִיר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דְּבַר־
הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ מַגִּיעַ שִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן
לַיְהוּדִים מִשְׁתֶּה וְיוֹם טוֹב וְרַבִּים מֵעַמֵּי

of Hephaestus. The Persian word for this postal system involving horses is called *angareion.*

The first report that reached Susa, that Xerxes had taken Athens, caused the Persians who had stayed at home so much pleasure that they spread myrtle over all the roads, burnt perfumed spices, and spent their time performing sacrificial rites and feasting. However, the arrival of the second message on top of the first so overwhelmed them that they all tore their tunics and gave themselves over to unending weeping and wailing.

16. This refers to the Jews of Shushan who, even more than the rest of the city, were overjoyed at the new edict. This verse is recited in the *Havdalah* service, the service marking the conclusion of the Sabbath.

17. As the new edict reaches each province, the Jews there rejoice also, for they know that they have been saved. Their joyousness is the antithesis of their mourning recorded in 4:3; the construction of the verses is similar. As before, their response involves performative actions, a public demonstration of their feelings. See the Commentary to 4:3 and compare also 9:17–19, 22. The reversal from mourning to joy brings to mind Ps. 30:12: "You turned my lament into dancing, you undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy."

holiday *Yom tov*; also in 9:19, 22, 28, 31, 32. Esther is the only place in the Bible where *yom tov* is used, as it is in the Mishnah and later literature, in reference to a specific set festival time.[5]

people of the land *'Ammei ha-'aretz,* that is, non-Jews. The term is often used in the postexilic period in contrast or opposition to the Jews, especially those returning to Judah. Here it refers to people of the Persian empire who were not Jews.

professed to be Jews A denominative verb in the *hitpa'el* form, with the possible meanings ranging from "they pretended to be Jews" to "they made themselves Jews" (that is, they converted to Judaism). The precise nuance of this form has engaged many commentators. The translation, "professed to be Jews," is nicely indeterminate. I favor Levenson's translation, "they identified themselves with the Jews," which I take to mean "they sided with the Jews." Apparently one had to be either for or against the Jews in this matter; there was no middle ground.

There is a body of interpretation advocating the meaning that some non-Jews converted to Judaism. Judith 14:10, where Achior converts to Judaism, is used as support. But religious conversion in the technical sense is later than I would date the Book of Esther. Moreover, religious conversion seems far-fetched in a book in which any mention of religious practice is studiously avoided. The emphasis here is not on religion, but on ethnic identification. The closest biblical parallel is Ruth's declaration of her identification with Naomi's people and God (Ruth 1:16).

Religious conversion begins in Hellenistic times, so it is not surprising that the Greek versions have understood this verse in the context of their own times and practices. The Septuagint reads: "And many of the Gentiles were circumcised and became Jews." Compare Jth. 14:10: "So he [Achior] was circumcised, and joined the house of Israel."

15

to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.

הָאָרֶץ מִתְיַהֲדִים כִּי־נָפַל פַּחַד־הַיְּהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם׃

Circumcision was (and still is), for a male, the *sine qua non* for conversion to Judaism and was seen as the main symbol of being Jewish.

fear of the Jews This fear is not a feeling of spiritual awe, but fear of a calamity, a military defeat.[6] It is the usual sense of "fear fell upon"—see also Exod. 15:16; 1 Sam. 11:7; Ps. 105:38; Job 13:11. The non-Jews feared the Jews—that is, feared to attack them in accordance with Haman's edict, for they knew that the Jews would fight back and feared that the Jews would prove stronger. The unlikelihood of non-Jews fearing the military strength of the Jews is just one more of many implausibilities in the book. All of this should be understood in the spirit of the carnivalesque, where reality is turned on its head. Only in a carnivalesque fiction could a small Jewish minority be given such power and privilege.

CHAPTER 9

Riots and Revelry

This chapter connects the events of the story with the holiday of Purim. It turns the story, which may once have existed independent of its Purim connection, into an etiology of Purim, providing the reason for both the origin of the holiday and for its annual celebration. This is most likely the reason that the Book of Esther became popular among the Jews and was taken into the biblical canon.

Chapter 9 portrays scenes of violence and revenge on a massive scale in the form of the massacre by the Jews of over 75,000 non-Jews. To make matters worse, the massacre is replayed a second time. This then becomes an occasion for celebration and merrymaking for all Jews everywhere. It is no wonder that this chapter did not resonate well with later readers, especially Christians, and many Jews, too, are uncomfortable with what they see as heartless and bloodthirsty Jewish revenge. That the massacre is not an act of revenge but is an act of self-defense taken by Jews against their enemies, explicitly stated in 9:2, does not lay their discomfort to rest.

A better way to relate to the events of chapter 9 is to see them as part of the carnivalesque farce that permeates the whole book and defines its genre.[1] Scenes of tumultuous riots and violent mock-destruction are completely at home in farcical and carnivalesque works; in fact, they are their hallmarks. Chapter 9 is the climax of the carnivalesque, the peak of disorder. Exaggeration and irrationality reach new heights, even for this book. But it is all in fun; nothing here is real. It is emotional release at its wildest.

Our reaction to the carnivalesque is a learned reaction. Children are often afraid of clowns and masquerades until they learn to laugh at them. There is, indeed, something dark and scary about the carnivalesque, just barely masked by the fun that surrounds it. The actions of carnival are playfully grotesque acts that would never be condoned in real life. It is in this context of carnivalesque violence that we should understand chapter 9.

The literary critic Eric Bentley makes an apt observation about the psychological nature of farce and about why a negative reaction to it misses the point.

> [I]n farce, as in dreams, one is permitted the outrage but is spared the consequences . . . .

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> But while dreams are ignored or forgotten, farces incur the censure of professional moralists and amateur psychologists. The thought arises: "The theatre is inciting my children to hate the home, if not to commit murder and arson. We must have more censorship!" It is overlooked that such fantasies are kept for dreams and pictures and plays just because each of us already has within him so strong a censorship, and it is wrongly inferred from the power of the fantasies that people are likely to fail to distinguish between fantasy and reality....
>
> The function of "farcical" fantasies, in dreams or in plays, is not as provocation but as compensation. The violent release is comparable to the sudden relieving hiss of steam through a safety valve. Certainly, the mental energies involved are destructive, and in all comedy there remains something of destructive orgy, farce being the kind of comedy which disguises that fact least thoroughly. But the function of orgies is also that of a safety valve. An orgy... is an essentially temporary truancy from the family pieties, and, like farces, if it has any appreciable effect at all, it helps those pieties to go on existing.[2]

What we have in chapter 9 is the orgy, the riot, the revelry that fits so well with farce and carnival. The violent free-for-all in which the Jews kill their enemies is transmuted into the revelry of the festival. The make-believe victory is the safety valve for Diaspora Jewry that permits the continuation of the belief in the security of their lives and their community. To put the world right, as the Book of Esther does, requires the removal of evil, of the enemy. This is the idea in Ps. 1:6: "For the Lord cherishes the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed" and in Ps. 104:35: "May sinners disappear from the earth, and the wicked be no more." It is not a matter of revenge, or even of defense, but a matter of the natural order of things in a perfect, enemy-free, world.

Throughout this Commentary we have taken pains to point out motifs shared by Esther and the Greek historiographers, and this chapter is no exception. The death of the Magi, as told by Herodotus 3.79, has often been compared to Esther because it, too, tells of a festival arising from a victory against an enemy; and like Esther it is violent and bloodthirsty.

> Once they had killed the Magi, the conspirators cut off their heads. They left their wounded comrades where they were, because they were incapacitated and because the acropolis needed guarding. Taking the heads of the Magi with them, they ran out of the palace. They raised the alarm as they went and shouted out their news to all the rest of the Persians, showing them the heads and calling them to arms. Meanwhile, they killed any Magi they came across. When the Persians learnt of the hoax the Magi had practised and realized what the seven had done, they decided to follow their lead; they drew their daggers and began to kill any Magi they could find, and if night had not intervened they would not have left a single one alive. This is now the most important day of the year in the Persian public calendar, and they spend it celebrating a major festival which they call the Magophonia. During the festival, no Magus is allowed to appear outdoors; they have to stay inside their houses all day long.

While the similarities between Esther and the story of the Magi are relevant to the question of shared literary motifs, the differences between them are more instructive because they shed light on the nature of the Book of Esther. Here, as elsewhere, the biblical account is less graphic than the Greek, with much less blood and guts. The Greek writers spare no detail, while the biblical author paints the scene with broad strokes of the brush, giving the main points but leaving the details for the reader to fill in. It is not important *how* the Jews killed their enemies, only that they did so, that they had been authorized to do so (by royal decree and by the rightness of their cause), and that they

9 And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their power. 2 Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who

ט וּבִשְׁנֵים עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר
בִּשְׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר יוֹם בּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הִגִּיעַ דְּבַר־
הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ לְהֵעָשׂוֹת בַּיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר שִׂבְּרוּ
אֹיְבֵי הַיְּהוּדִים לִשְׁלוֹט בָּהֶם וְנַהֲפוֹךְ הוּא
אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלְטוּ הַיְּהוּדִים הֵמָּה בְּשֹׂנְאֵיהֶם׃
2 נִקָּהֲלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים בְּעָרֵיהֶם בְּכָל־מְדִינוֹת
הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ לִשְׁלֹחַ יָד בִּמְבַקְשֵׁי

were amazingly successful in their undertaking. Another difference between the Greek and the Hebrew accounts is that the author of Esther is describing Jewish actions for a Jewish audience, while Herodotus is describing Persian actions for a Greek audience. The author's attitude toward his subject, is, therefore, quite different in the two cases. For the Greeks, the Persians were an alien and therefore inferior people; and one may note a tone of detachment tinged with distaste—the narrator is like an anthropologist reporting unsympathetically about the practice of a strange tribe. The biblical account of the battle and the festival is altogether different in tone. The biblical narrator identifies with his subject, and the account is much more celebratory. The narrator approves of the Jews' acts and is cheering them on and enjoying their success. Herodotus may have intended a bit of satire against the Persians, but he was not writing comedy. Farcical comedy can only be directed at one's own society, its customs and values, its wishes and fears. That is one of the major differences between Esther's account of the origin of Purim and Herodotus's account of the massacre of the Magi.

The etiology of Purim dominates the last part of this chapter. An etiology stands outside of the plot of the story, but may be written as part and parcel of the work in which it is contained. By that I mean that the etiology of Purim in chapter 9, at least until verse 29, was probably written at the same time as the rest of the book (see the Commentary to vv. 24–25). I am not saying that the story did not exist independently, in one form or another, prior to its appearance in the Masoretic Text. My point is that I see the present form of the story along with the etiology of Purim as the work of the Masoretic author. This author reshaped the earlier story for use as an explanation of and as encouragement for the perpetual celebration of Purim. Purim needs this type of justification, for it is a "new" holiday, the first new holiday not commanded in the Torah. The reference to more than one Purim letter suggests that Purim may not have been widely celebrated at first and needed the authentication and authority of the book.[3]

1. The day has now arrived on which Haman's decree was to have taken effect—the day on which the enemies of the Jews looked forward to overpowering them. But because of Mordecai's decree, the opposite took place and the Jews triumphed over their enemies. This is the greatest and most important of the many reversals in the story, and it sums up the underlying theme of Jewish security in the Diaspora. The outcome of events is given at the start; it is not a question of whether the Jews will win, but how they will win and how great their victory will be.

2. ***In their cities*** In all cities throughout the empire where Jews resided. Jews were a minority in these cities.

to attack those who sought their hurt While some in Persia sided with the Jews (8:17), others were prepared to do them harm, and it is these enemies that the Jews attack.

18

"Happiness is a Serious Problem" by Dennis Prager

PREMISES

"We are morally obligated to be as happy as we can be." It is not selfish to want to be happy. It's our obligation to the people we love and live with to be as bearable as we can be. Happiness, Prager said, is altruistic!

Unhappiness is "the easy way out." It takes no spark or conviction to be bummed out by life. What a dull syllogism: Life isn't working out for me, therefore the whole world sucks, therefore I'm gonna wear my negative attitude like a sandwich-board sign. "Any jerk can be unhappy — it takes effort, talent, and skill to be happy!"

Happiness is undefinable. "I have no definition for happiness," Prager said. "But then, I define very little that is really important. To say that love is an intense positive feeling isn't much help — its just a synonym. I prefer to say about happiness what the Supreme Court justice said about pornography: I can't define it, but I know it when I see it."

Adopt a tragic attitude toward life. This may sound crazy, but it has been a blessing for Prager. Accept that life can be brutish and short and unfair, and happiness automatically comes into perspective for you. People who live lives of rose-colored, Barbie-like optimism are the ones who never quite learn the gravity of life, and the gratitude we must have in order to be happy.

Don't aim for a happiness score of 10. Life is not a two-hour movie, rife with peak experiences. We have to make it last a long time, and so it has long stretches of blah. Aim for a solid 7.5 average, with a couple of nines and a lot of fives.

OBSTACLES

Human nature. It is not in people's nature to be content for long with their condition. Prager noted that a baby's first three words tend to be mama, dada, and more. If you expect to be completely satisfied, give it up. You can't successfully suppress this insatiability, he said, but you can come to terms with it — and prevent it from making you perpetually unhappy.

Genetics. Not everyone has a naturally high EQ. Some of us are born to be gloomy and moody. Brain chemistry may be a part of this, or simply personality. It is no disgrace to be this way, nor is it a disgrace to try to reverse the condition through prescription medicine.

Comparisons. We destroy our own chances for happiness when we compare what we have with what other people have. The grass always seems to be happier on the other side. But Prager noted that the happiness of others is proportionate to how little we know them. To really know people is to come to terms with their struggles and pain. People who seem so happy externally may be faking it — or we just don't know them well.

Images. A confirmed bachelor explained to Prager why he hadn't yet married: he was searching for a Playboy bunny who studied Torah. We all have an image of the perfect job or the perfect spouse or the perfect circumstances, but guess what — we live in the world of reality, not images.

Equating happiness with success. There is only room for one #1 of anything, so why drive yourself crazy competing against hundreds for an attainment only one can win? Plus, the insatiability factor kicks in: even if we are, to all intents and purposes, successful, there is always more success to be had. People driven to succeed are never happy, by definition — it is not in their nature to ever be content. Jimmy Carter pined to be president, then found he hated the job. Today that prune-faced man is the happiest of ex-presidents, and his greatest love is helping build homes for poor people, so do not envy those more successful than yourself. In the words of the Edwin Arlington Robinson poem, about a successful man whom everyone envied "Corey, one calm summer night, went home and put a bullet through his head."

"Missing tile" syndrome. You know how if you have a ceiling with one missing tile, your eye and mind tend to dwell on the one missing piece? "A bald man once told me, when I walk into a room, all I see is hair." Never mind that people wDennis Pragerith hair never give it, or your lack of it, a moment's thought. Prager's advice: replace the tile or forget about it.

Equating happiness with fun. If you love having fun, forget about being happy, because fun is about what you are experiencing right now, whereas happiness is the longer-term outcome. Promiscuous people have a lot of fun, because seducing and being seduced are terrific fun. But do they make anyone happy? Doubtful. "I am for having fun in life," Prager said, "but not for living for fun."

Expectations. Studying Buddhism as a young man, Prager acquired its core practice of shunning expectations. This goes along with his thoughts about the tragic nature of life: he who expects happiness will not be grateful when it makes its appearance, whereas he who does not expect it will rejoice at its arrival. "The more I think about it, the more I think that gratitude is the great unifying force for both happiness and goodness," Prager said.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Know that everything has a price. Milton Friedman's philosophy of economics dovetails perfectly with Dennis Prager's philosophy of life: "There's no such thing as a free lunch." We know the price of things we buy, he said, but not the price of things we don't buy. But we are paying one, whether it is in dollars or time or self-respect or lost trust or meaning.
The 3.5 hours we spend watching the tube every night could be spent doing something else — reading, or talking, or doing things with our families. The TV wasn't free — it cost you a chunk of your life that you can never experience again any other way. Why does this matter? Because it makes us pay attention, and paying attention is critical to happiness.

Know what to do with your vices. We all have 'em, whether they're sex or food or gambling or acquiring things. Prager is not a bluenose. It would be tragic if there were no Las Vegas in Nevada, but it will also be a tragedy if every state has a Las Vegas. We need to get a little crazy every now and then, so long as we don't hurt anybody. The key phrase is a little. "I'm a passionate moderate," Prager insists. He was chagrined to hear a religious leader he respects suggest that a loving husband does not lust after his wife. "Marriage is a great place to let our lower parts express themselves," he said. "There's a lot of raunchy, filthy, disgusting, fantastic stuff in there." And marriage is the perfect place to understand and experience it. He urged us to go home and tell our spouses what we'd really like to do — the risk is small, and the payoff in happiness substantial. "Go home and ask your spouses what was their basest thought? Sure beats 'How was your day?' "

Don't feel guilty about bad thoughts. It's better to think bad and do good than to feel good and do nothing. Prager recalled a man who called saying he was wracked with guilt because he sometimes wished his mother, whom he cared for, would die. Prager told him to buck up and be proud of himself. The man's thoughts about his mother's death caused no harm; they were immaterial. What was totally material was his day-to-day caring for his mother. The caller wasn't a louse, he was a hero, and should feel proud and not ashamed.

Locate the positive. A happy person is someone who finds the bright side at the bottom of a coal mine at night without a Coleman lantern. Prager told how he once rented a first-floor apartment on New York's Upper West Side, and reassured himself that the first floor — legendarily vulnerable to thieves — was the best of all possible worlds. Close to the laundry, you don't need an elevator, you don't need to lug your groceries up five flights of stairs, etc. "There are few unambiguous blessings in life," he said, so why not choose the perspective that gives you pleasure? You're going to have triplets? Marvelous, get your parenting our of the way while you're still young! Bumped from a plane? Terrific, that gives you another night to explore the fantasyland that is Valparaiso, Indiana.

Get a philosophy. A "tragic view of life" and the Buddhist notion of "no expectations" both constitute a philosophy. Nonphilosophical people lack consistency. Philosophical people have a single worldview that applies to everything they experience. It is a way of putting problematic things into perspective.

Prager wants us to have one, because without one, we think we are exempt from the laws of life. He cited a man who used to pray, until his brother died, and then stopped. Prager went ballistic: "So it was OK for God to take other men's brothers, just not yours?" Likewise the liberal family that opposed capital punishment until one of their own was murdered, and then they wanted blood.

Compare those reactions to that of Prager's friend Joe Telushkin (who will be appearing at The Masters Forum in 1998). After experiencing a flat tire in the middle of a blizzard, he shrugged it off: "I believe that we all have a flat tire quota," Telushkin said. "It was time for me to fulfill mine."

Make friends. If life is a journey, he said, don't make it alone. We need not only individual friends but couple friends, too. Prager is high on friendship. "Friends are terrific, the flower of our existence. They, not our families, are the people we choose to have in our lives." Prager thinks people should "date to make friends," much as we date to find suitable life partners. Couple friends are especially important, but they must be honest. What kind of friendship do couples have when, years after knowing one another, one couple is astonished that the other is splitting up?

To find happiness, pursue things that are more important. Here's the paradox: seeking happiness as our paramount goal can't result in happiness. Happiness is always the result of something else, something we care about more than our own fleeting mental states.

We need passionate pursuits to be happy. The more passion we have in our lives, the happier we will be. Prager injected another of his curious finding-the-pony-in-the-manure stories, this one about bad dates. "I believe there can be good in any situation," said the man who claimed to have no expectations. "When I meet someone boring, I try to find out what makes them boring. After a while, the boredom becomes fascinating!"

What can we pursue besides boredom? How about **wisdom**, a quest for something beyond individual success? How about **clarity**, a quest for greater awareness, an understanding of our own inner space? How about **depth**, the quest for whatever is richer, more profound, or better done? (Prager chose, unjustly in my opinion, to characterize Beethoven's music as deep, and the Grateful Dead's as shallow.) How about **transcendence** — the attraction to what is greater than us, the search for God?

Be good. It is not a big leap from Godhood to goodness. Prager believes strongly that being good is a pathway to greater happiness, and he refutes the notion we have that there are rotten scoundrels out there who are happier than we are. They can't be happy, Prager says, because their badness, their inability to see goodness in others, prevents them from having friendships. They think everyone is as awful as they are, and that is their punishment — isolation from the happiness trust and friendship bring.

Practice self-control. You can't be happy if you can't control yourself. Our society is unwilling to come to grips with the fact that a lot of our bad stuff is inside us, not out there. We should make a sign and hang it on our foreheads, facing toward us, and it should say: I AM MY BIGGEST PROBLEM. This applies to our addictions, our neuroses, our failure to think of other people, our inconsistencies. Until we are willing to do yardwork on our own side of the fence, we are not likely to enjoy the gardens on the other side.

Get help. Prager gives thumbs up to both psychotherapy and religion. Psychotherapy, if you are lucky enough to have a competent therapist, and can afford it, is the only way we have to find out what is going on inside us. It can unlock the mysteries of our own nature. And religion is our only way of unlocking the greater mystery, of what is all around us, and what it might mean. We take our car in for maintenance, he said, but we don't take ourselves in when we develop a knock or a ping.

Everyone should go to therapy, he said, and everyone should find a moment now and then to pray. It acknowledges that surface happiness arises from something deeper within. Without inner understanding, happiness is a joke.

HAPPINESS

CHARLIE BROWN:
HAPPINESS IS FINDING A PENCIL.

SNOOPY:
PIZZA WITH *...mushrooms*

LINUS:
TELLING THE TIME.

SCHROEDER:
HAPPINESS IS LEARNING TO WHISTLE.

LINUS:
TYING YOUR SHOE FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME.

SALLY:
HAPPINESS IS PLAYING THE DRUM IN YOUR OWN SCHOOL BAND.

CHARLIE BROWN:
AND HAPPINESS IS WALKING HAND IN HAND.
HAPPINESS IS TWO KINDS OF ICE CREAM.

LUCY:
KNOWING A SECRET.

SCHROEDER:
CLIMBING A TREE.

CHARLIE BROWN:
HAPPINESS IS FIVE DIFFERENT CRAYONS.

SCHROEDER:
CATCHING A FIREFLY.
SETTING HIM FREE.

CHARLIE BROWN:
HAPPINESS IS BEING ALONE EVERY NOW AND THEN.

ALL:
AND HAPPINESS IS COMING HOME AGAIN.

CHARLIE BROWN:
HAPPINESS IS MORNING AND EVENING,
DAY TIME AND NIGHT TIME TOO.
FOR HAPPINESS IS ANYONE AND ANYTHING AT ALL
THAT'S LOVED BY YOU.

LINUS:
HAPPINESS IS HAVING A SISTER.

LUCY:
SHARING A SANDWICH.

LUCY AND LINUS:
GETTING ALONG.

ALL:
HAPPINESS IS SINGING TOGETHER WHEN DAY IS THROUGH,
AND HAPPINESS IS THOSE WHO SING WITH YOU.
HAPPINESS IS MORNING AND EVENING,
DAYTIME AND NIGHTTIME TOO.

CHARLIE BROWN:
FOR HAPPINESS IS ANYONE AND ANYTHING AT ALL
THAT'S LOVED BY YOU.