

TZOM ESTHER & PURIM

Preparing to Fast and Spiel

3.3.15

IT WAS HARD to get in a party mood for Purim because Milton died fifteen days ago. At the moment he drifted off (that's how it appeared—nothing violent nor discernible), Dave, Ben, and I were in Milt's room at the nursing home, with Dave's mom, sisters, and nieces. Molly was in London with her synagogue confirmation class. The private details of the scene are calcified in my memory, as they are, I'm sure, for all of us who were present for Milton's last moments. Dave and I weighed whether to call Molly, but knew how upset she'd be across the ocean. We decided to wait for her to return two days later, to tell her in person.

"Who will live and who will die?" The words of the High Holy Day prayer come back to me, unsparing, irreversible. When we recited that chilling liturgy five months ago, I didn't think it would touch us. But built into Jewish poetry is reality: inevitable losses and some immutable, unknowable plan about who will be taken and when.

Dave invites me to say a few words at Milt's funeral, which I consider a privilege as an in-law, a chance to say out loud what I learned watching Phyllis and her children attend to Milt so lovingly in his last months. "They never announced their devotion," I write. "It was just

there—in every large and tiny moment, in every errand, every meal, every phone call, text, touch, and gesture—so small you could sometimes miss it. . . . Just today there’s an essay in the *New York Times* by Dr. Oliver Sacks, the neurologist and author, in which he writes about being told his cancer is terminal. ‘I cannot pretend that I am without fear,’ he writes. ‘But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved.’ Milt, you have loved and been loved. There is no greater legacy.” (Sacks died six months later.)

The shiva at Sharon’s house is intimate and brief. Phyllis doesn’t want more than one day of communal mourning, and that makes sense. She and Milt were not observant, and the traditional seven days of visitors and condolences would be excruciating for Phyllis, who weeps whenever Milt’s name is spoken. “Jewish law protects mourners in two ways,” writes Princeton professor Esther Schor, “by ensuring that they are never alone and by limiting the duration of the mourning period.” I remember one rabbi comparing the end of shiva to Sukkot, which kicks us outdoors after days of atonement in synagogue. We are nudged back into life after a death. Routines resume; we have to breathe the air again.

The reception at Dave’s sister’s home is more cheerful than any of us expected. So many people show up from different stages of their lives—the old Irish neighbors, Milt’s nephew, Dave’s childhood friend’s dad. As we stand around the living room and kitchen, Phyllis’s rabbi leads us all in brief prayers and announces that the mourners should be able to fill their plates first. Phyllis overrules the rabbi, and insists everyone dig into the deli spread laid out on the kitchen island. Fran Drescher once told me in an interview that, “Jews eat to celebrate and they eat to mourn.” A truer word . . .



Two weeks later, I have to gear back up for a holiday that requires raucous revelry. Purim is a dark story marked by a crazy party. (I’m still unsure why a close brush with extermination became, in the Middle Ages, an opportunity for costumes and farce, but there you

have it.) Milt's death doesn't have to be set aside, however. I've learned by now that Jewish tradition holds sorrow and joy in both hands.

So I dutifully dive into Purim, and first make sure I know the plot. (Leap ahead two paragraphs if you're fluent in Purim.)

It's the fifth century B.C.E., about a hundred years after the First Temple's destruction. The Jews who were exiled to Babylon are now ruled by Persian king Ahaseurus, who thinks highly of himself. In the city of Shushan, the king's adviser, Haman, is a cruel Jew-hater. He hatches a plan to kill all the Jews and draws lots ("purim") to pick the day it will happen, persuading Ahaseurus to go along. A proclamation is made throughout the kingdom: on that day, all Jews shall be killed. A Jew named Mordechai entreats his cousin, the gorgeous Queen Esther, to prevent it by pleading for mercy with her husband the king.

Esther was married to Ahaseurus essentially against her will. He chose her out of a bevy of prospective wives at a banquet after banishing his then-wife, Vashti, who refused to display her beauty for his guests. (Some say she refused to dance naked.) Esther's Jewish roots were kept secret when she married the king, so for her to now entreat her husband would mean exposing her Judaism. Not to mention that in those days it was life-threatening to approach the king without having been summoned. Nevertheless, she screws up the courage, successfully appeals to her husband, and foils the massacre. The king kills Haman and his sons, and then, because the proclamation could not officially be cancelled according to Persian law, the Jews can only defend themselves with a preemptive strike. Some say they took self-defense too far, slaughtering 75,000.

Purim's modern observance, at least in Reform synagogues I've visited, doesn't focus on that brutal coda, highlighting instead the reenactment of cruel Haman and courageous Esther. The ritual is to read aloud the story from a scroll of parchment known as the *megillah*, which has the biblical book of Esther inscribed on it. The narrative is then often theatricalized with wacky costumes, in a play called a *spiel*—pronounced "shpeel." Whenever Haman is mentioned during the satire, people "boo" vigorously or spin noisemakers, called groggers, to drown out his name.

Purim is, hands down, the biggest party of the Jewish year. Simchat Torah pales by comparison, with its sips of single malt. *This* is the Big Megillah (wordplay intended), and we're supposed to get so trashed that we can't tell the difference between Mordechai (good guy) and Haman (really bad).

I decide to sample some of the elaborate spiel-prep under way in New York City, so I spend an evening watching rehearsals at Stephen Wise Synagogue on the Upper West Side, where congregant Norman Roth, seventy-six, a retired accountant, has been writing and directing the shul's spiel for the last three decades. Some of his past triumphs line the stairway in colorful, theatrical show posters with titles like "Michael Jackson's The Thriller Megiller," "Les Mis—Les Megillah," and "Oh What a Spiel—The Jersey Boys Megillah." This year's theme is Elvis. One of Roth's lyrics riffs on "Blue Suede Shoes," when the king tells Haman, "Don't you step on my Shushan Jews," a reference to Persia's city.

Roth takes great pride in his spiel scripts—he tells me no one else works on theirs as long or sells them for \$250 a pop. And he points out that, in his librettos, Haman never dies. "We have very few men in the show, so we need Haman for the closing number. We never kill him off. We always have a line—something like, 'You're going to hang on your gallows, but before you do, you've got to be in the final song!'"

I ask Norman if it gives him pause to know he's leaving out the real, bloody end of the story—the 75,000 slain. "I don't think God really let that happen," he says. "That's human beings writing that story; not God."

But it's in the megillah, I point out.

"It's not in *my* megillah," Roth counters.

It's a kick for me to watch amateur actors—committed congregants—moving through the choreography in sweatpants and jeans, trying to remember their lines, teasing each other, swaying those Elvis hips. I note how earnestly this is taken; these actors have a job to do and they're untiring. I'm laughing in the empty seats, wishing my synagogue had Roth's scripts so I could rehearse zany songs with fellow congregants and revisit my childhood theater obsession.

But my amusement is tempered when I remember I have to fast before this holiday.

It must be embroidered on a sampler somewhere: “Before Jews party, they should suffer.” Wednesday, March 4, the day before Purim, is Ta’anit Esther (the Fast of Esther). This will be my fourth fast of the year, with two more to go.

Ta’anit Esther is not in the Bible, but was created by the rabbis in the eighth century. (Jewish tradition is, as I’m learning, an amalgam of rites and prayers, authored by ancient rabbis who invoked the Hebrew Bible to institute new rituals.) This fast springs from the book of Esther—in the Bible’s “Writings” section—when Esther decides to prepare herself to confront her husband by fasting for a day.

One Esther-expert is Dr. Erica Brown, a D.C.-based author and educator who has been publicly applauded by her famous students, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks and former NBC anchor David Gregory. I’ve never met her, but I’m a fan from afar; she sends a weekly email blast with Torah ruminations that I find absorbing. She wrote her doctorate on Esther.

“The thing that I most admire about the Esther story,” she tells me over the phone from Washington, “is its notion of the tests that are thrown at an individual and the way in which they transform themselves as a result.” Esther was transformed by her newfound bravery. She took on a task that she first refused.

Brown continues, “Esther’s cousin, Mordechai, says to her, essentially, ‘How do you know you weren’t put in this position of royalty for exactly this moment?’ I would throw in the Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In* way of looking at this: of initially having the insecurity to say, ‘I’m not the right person. I can’t do this for any number of reasons’; you opt out of your own future. And then you have someone like Mordechai who says, ‘No, this is your time. Take advantage. Leap into that.’”

I think about the challenges I’ve avoided, the moments I’ve chickened out. A few come to mind, both large and quotidian: causes I didn’t fight for (see gun control), people I haven’t aided (see domestic-abuse victims and Rwandan refugees), articles I didn’t pitch (a long list), physical feats I avoided (see parasailing).

But this holiday forces me to reflect on leadership, what it means to be thrust forward when that wasn't your plan. Seven months earlier, I was asked by the current president of Central Synagogue if I would be interested in succeeding him. The very request left me choked up. The job is not only a tremendous honor, but also daunting and important. I love Central in a way I never expected to love an institution. I've seen how clergy can deepen daily life, how a synagogue community can anchor a family. But if you'd asked me back in college, when I was focused on being an actor or writer, if I thought I'd end up as a shul president, I'd have said, "In what universe?" Now this invitation feels like a blessing and a test: Can you do your part to guide a place that has challenged and changed you? Obviously, being a board president isn't comparable to Esther's assignment. But Judaism is always asking us to apply epic stories to everyday decisions.

I say yes to Central's president and yes to Esther's fast, even though it's another holiday that few around me observe. This particular fast appears to be a gauge of loyalty: Can you do a hard thing to support the person doing the harder thing? Esther asked her people to fast with her before she risked her life. I will skip food and drink from dawn to dusk in solidarity.

"The joy of victory in her story is so much more colorful, rich, and deep when you participate in the suffering," Brown says. "The joy that I experience every Purim is heightened by the fact that I've fasted and I've tried to put myself in that moment of risk—leadership risk—that Esther took all those years ago, because so much pivoted on that one individual. So being with her in that moment of anxiety and suffering and worrying about the future helps me celebrate her."

I love Brown's term "leadership risk" because, as I get older, I've come to see how those words are conjoined. Trying to lead is risky, but, then, so is not trying. Despite my mother's feminist inculcation, I often worry that people will see audacity in my saying "I'm up to the task." Esther reminds me to stop apologizing for myself and get on with it. Then again, she was saving lives, which is a little more pressing.

Just when I think my Esther learning is complete, I stumble on another interpretation of the fast day. Esther is apparently not just a paradigm of fortitude; she has, in modern times, become a symbol of enslavement. She was “picked” by the king for betrothal and sexual satisfaction without much say in the matter, and therefore represents subjugated women everywhere.

Yaffa Epstein, a sparkplug who teaches Talmud at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies (based in Jerusalem) and at Yeshivat Maharat in New York (the first Orthodox Yeshiva to ordain women), tells me that the Fast of Esther was chosen in 1990 to be Yom Ha’Agunah—The Day of the Chained Woman. The *agunah* (chained woman) is the wife who cannot extricate herself from her marriage because, according to Jewish law, only men can dissolve a wedding vow. This forces women to remain in a loveless union or to carry the stigma of remarrying illegally, without a *gett* (divorce certificate).

During this particular year of my Jewish immersion, there have been headlines about Gital Dodelson, twenty-five, who waited three years for a *gett*, and Rivky Stein, also twenty-five, who testified in January about being unable to break free.

Three decades ago, the Day of Agunah was assigned to Ta’anit Esther very consciously by the International Coalition for Agunot Rights (ICAR). It shows me that ancient rabbis were not the only arbiters of holidays and symbolism; assigning meaning is still happening in my lifetime. “ICAR wanted to tie it to Esther,” Epstein explains, “because Esther is this powerful woman who brought salvation, but also because she’s trapped in this terrible marriage and is a victim of the king’s power.”

Blu Greenberg, who founded the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) in 1997 and who is married to Yitz is an old friend of my mother’s, was part of the early ICAR discussions about whether Ta’anit Esther was a match for Agunah Day. “Some women argued that it would muddy the focus on Purim and their rabbinic authorities would object,” Blu recalls, adding that two coalition members pulled out in protest.

But the Agunah-Esther link won out, even though Blu cautions that symbolism and fasting are insufficient. “Hopefully the prayer and

awareness on Ta'anit Esther will inspire us to activism. God is not going to solve this problem."

When I ask her for a suggestion as to what I might *do* that's meaningful during the Esther fast this coming week, she urges me to educate myself about agunot. A good place to start, she offers, would be to view the Golden Globe-nominated Israeli film (in theaters when we speak), called *Gett: Trial of Viviane Amsalem*, which depicts a woman who is desperate to divorce. I look up a critic's review: "It's not Viviane who's on trial in 'Gett,'" says the *Washington Post*. "Rather, it's the system that's perverse, in the way that it treats wives not like people, but property."

As I make my movie reservations on Fandango, I can hear some traditionalist readers insisting that it's a bastardization to make the Fast of Esther about Jewish women stuck in unhappy marriages. But Yaffa Epstein says the tie is appropriate. "It's an attempt to ground my reality in my ancient narrative. If the Fast of Esther was just about some woman who was the Queen of Persia, why should I care today? So we need to answer that question as a Jewish community: Where is the relevance? What can it teach me today?"

I have no personal connection to the agunah, but the notion that women can't get free of soured marriages does test my commitment to refraining from judgment this year. It's hard to square the message of kindness in Judaism with the severity of Orthodox divorce law. My answer is just to keep moving toward Purim itself, noting the discordance between Elvis's hips and chained women, between fasting and inebriation, between pride in Esther's valor and qualms about the 75,000 we killed after she saved us.



Rabba Yaffa Epstein

ON PURIM

Today we think about Purim as a day of partying and excessive drinking and masquerading and customs, but it's actually so much deeper than that. If we look at what's happened to the character of Haman, he has been imbued with every enemy of the Jewish people. Haman has taken on the face of whatever threat we Jews were, and are now, confronting. At different times in Jewish history, we've called Haman the different names of our oppressors. We've dressed him up in different garb and allowed him to represent each peril. There's always a Haman.

