

THE PURIM REPORT

Mirth and Melancholy

3.9.15

SET MY ALARM for 5 A.M. so that I can have a quick breakfast before the Esther fast begins at daybreak (6:26 A.M.) on Wednesday, March 4, 2015. I honor Elvis by eating his favorite sandwich—peanut butter and banana—because The King is the theme of the Purim Spiel at Stephen Wise Free Synagogue, where, a week earlier, I had sat in on intensive rehearsal.

I take a quiet pause in the dawn darkness to mark the reason for Ta'anit Esther: our heroine fasted and asked the Jews to join her before she petitioned for their survival.

I deliver to neighbors the holiday hamantaschen, which my daughter Molly and I baked together—our first flour-drenched foray into the cookies shaped like Haman's hat, folding circles of dough into three corners and filling them with jam. Amidst all of my holiday studying, this activity reminds me that the sweetest traditions often come down to tactile projects and the taste of a misshapen dessert.

Packaging three cookies in each cellophane gift bag—tying the openings with ribbons and a “Happy Purim” note—I drop the parcels on doormats in our apartment building.

I then attend an early-afternoon showing of the film *Gett: The Trial of Vivianne Amsalem*—my small nod to The Day of Agunah, or “the Day of the Chained Woman,” which some have assigned to the Fast of Esther.

I walk alone through Central Park, weary of the biting cold and the absence of anything green, aware of bareness in the city despite so many colorful Purim parties about to commence.

I enter Congregation Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue, the massive, cathedral-like synagogue whose members include Joan Rivers and Michael R. Bloomberg.

I’m here to attend my first “Purim Scotch Tasting,” which I hear is *de rigueur* for Purim eve: the Esther fast ends with a cocktail. It’s a preamble to the partying that Purim demands. We’re supposed to get so inebriated that we can’t tell the difference between Mordechai and Haman, the hero and the villain.

Presiding behind the makeshift bar is the convivial Senior Rabbi, Joshua Davidson, who has, in his brief two years at Emanu-El, already generated a buzz for combining intellect and wit.

“Macallan or Dewars?” he offers to those lined up for a sample. “Rocks or neat?”

I’m hesitant to drink before eating, but Davidson, whom I know because we both attended a Jewish conference the previous fall, waves me into the queue.

Jackie Mason had it wrong when he said gentiles are focused on the next cocktail and Jews on the next meal. I’m learning that Jews do their share of drinking on the holidays. There’s wine every Shabbat, single malt on Simchat Torah, eggnog on Hanukkah (okay, maybe just in my family), four cups of wine on Tu B’Shtat, four cups on Passover—and now we’re supposed to get blotto on Purim.

Since I have been fasting since sunup, I’m already a little woozy from hunger. But as they say, “When in Rome,” or, in this case, in temple. So as soon as the fast ends after dusk—5:50 p.m. (believe me, I checked in advance)—I belly up to the rabbi’s bar.

Suffice it to say that whiskey is not the best way to break a fast. To soften the blow, I reach for some of Emanu-El’s hamantaschen. The

cookies are nestled temptingly on a paper plate (their triangles neater than mine), and I try not to appear voracious as I take two pastries. There is barely a moment to revive before it's time for the megillah—the annual recitation of the Esther story. Scripts are distributed and one of the associate rabbis insists that I accept a role. As I demur (unsuccessfully), I watch Rabbi Davidson, standing now between pews, suddenly transform himself from jovial barkeeper to menacing Haman, as he dons a black cape, pirate hat, and black leather gloves. “I had to combine store-bought costumes for Darth Vader, Dracula, and Captain Hook,” he says to me in a dry aside. “You don’t come by a Haman costume easily in this town.”

The assigned readers are encouraged to make use of the hats and props lined up onstage—a cane, boa, baseball mitt. All of us conscripted “actors” are responsible for recounting one segment of the Esther/Haman story, standing in front of a microphone at the front. I’ve been assigned the first section; no chance to learn from others’ mistakes.

“Choose a prop!” someone commands. I reach for the crown.

“That was going to be MY prop!” shouts a girl (who looks six years old).

“Way to go, Abby, spoiling the kid’s megillah,” I internally scold myself. I surrender the tiara and grab the nose glasses.

Someone tells me to pick one of the slips of paper with the “directions”—each a prompt for *how* to perform your section while you read it aloud.

My instruction: “Act as if your leg is being bitten by a dog.”

I gamely attempt to pantomime this as I recite the text about the town of Shushan and the king’s banquet, but the applause isn’t exactly deafening. Davidson’s colleague Rabbi Amy Ehrlich is kind enough to capture the moment with an iPhone, and I find myself hoping that my dog mauling doesn’t end up on social media.

The next reader has to enact “being swarmed by bees.” She is better at the bees than I was at the dog. Her bee attack is totally believable.

The education director, Saul Kaiserman, rises estimably to his challenge: “Sing every line like an opera score.” He kills it with a baritone.

Rabbi Davidson is Stanislavski-worthy. He has to read his part as if giving birth in the back of a taxi. If you'll excuse the pun, he delivers.

This ritual proves that the so-called "People of the Book" can also be the People of the Party—if only once a year and despite the somber source material. (Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews isn't exactly a laugh riot. Nor is the Jews' revenge—cast as self-defense—when they slaughter those 75,000 Persians.)

But the tradition also speaks to the importance of letting go a little, even as it stresses solemnity. We should revisit the past's calamities, yes, but also seize the chance to exhale. There's something undeniably spiriting—and arguably important—about watching our authoritative clergy leaders loosen up.

Just six months earlier, I had seen Rabbi Davidson in a very different context, as one of a few rabbis invited—along with Jewish journalists, educators, artists, foundation professionals, and social-justice activists—to a three-day conversation about all things Jewish, convened by the *Jewish Week* newspaper. In small breakout groups, we discussed loaded subjects ranging from the coarsening of Jewish disagreement to whether Chabad is the gold standard for Jewish engagement. I saw Rabbi Davidson thoughtfully grapple with hard questions. Now I am watching him simulate Lamaze breathing while reciting the words of Mordechai.

I leave this gathering wishing I'd grown up with spiels, performing them with my kids. Just like I didn't build a sukkah with Ben or Molly every fall, I didn't put them in costume for Purim every spring. My kids are too old now to be able to say, "I grew up playing Haman, Mordechai, or Esther. . . ." They didn't. They don't know the story by heart.



The next day is Purim itself (March 5), and I do a mental inventory to ensure I've observed all four *mitzvot* (commandments) of the holiday:

1. Read and hear the megillah: Check. (In nose glasses.)

2. Have a festive meal: Check. (At lunchtime, I enjoy a nice chicken paillard with my former Senior Rabbi, Peter Rubinstein, and hear all about his recent public dialogue with Cardinal Timothy Dolan.)

3. Bestow two edible gifts: Check. (The neighbors seemed to enjoy our deformed hamantaschen, though maybe they were just being polite.)

4. Give gifts to the poor: Check. (I donated to “charity: water,” which builds wells in developing countries, and I made a date to go to a local eyeglass store with Betty, who sells newspapers on the street corner near my shul and has broken lenses.)

Purim reinforces the generosity that almost every Jewish holiday requires. On the High Holy Days we’re reminded that *tzedakah* (charity) will “lessen the severity of the decree”; on Sukkot, we’re supposed to feed guests in our sukkah; on Hanukkah, we’re to reserve one of the eight nights to give instead of receive; on the Tenth of Tevet, the fast should focus us on the needy; and on Passover, we welcome the stranger. So it is not surprising that Purim also demands that we step up. Perhaps no other holiday so closely aligns self-indulgence and selflessness in one twenty-four-hour period.

“The Jewish tradition asks us to stay in between these two extremes,” says Yaffa Epstein, who teaches Talmud at the Pardes Institute for Jewish Learning in Jerusalem. “What’s beautiful about that is, they’re both necessary.”

I keenly experienced these two extremes when I stood (pre-scotch, pre-spiel) in the pew next to Rabbi Davidson—who kindly invited me to join him—saying Kaddish for Milt.

The mourner’s prayer—recited at nearly every service—reminds me how Judaism brings us back to those we’ve lost, no matter how merry

the festival. We are repeatedly taught to hold two thoughts at once: after Rosh Hashanah (joyful), we enter Yom Kippur (ominous); on Passover, we eat *maror* (bitter herb) and *haroset* (sweet apples and nuts); in my shul on Friday nights, we say the *misheberach* prayer for the sick immediately followed by the *shehecheyanu* (gratitude) for our blessings. On Purim eve, we recite both a solemn Kaddish and a mad-cap megillah within the same hour.

In his 2013 Rosh Hashanah sermon, his first at Emanu-El, Rabbi Davidson said, “While our congregation celebrates countless joys, there exists enough suffering here to break the heart.” He’s right: Jews revel and weep in the same moment. That was evident at Milt’s shiva and even ninety minutes after his passing. After the shock at his bedside, our tight embraces and the required phone call to alert the funeral home, my sister-in-law, Sharon, interrupted our weeping: “Should we still keep our dinner reservation at P.F. Chang’s?” The laughter was instantaneous and restorative. We could smile despite the pain, hold our heaviness and our hearty Jewish appetites at the same time. Milt, too, would have laughed and insisted we go eat fried dumplings.

Yes, Jackie Mason, you’re right: Jews are always planning the next meal.

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.

