

Purim

Purim (based on the Book of Esther in the Bible) is the noisiest holiday of the year. It celebrates God's deliverance of Persian Jews through Esther, a beautiful Jewish girl. As winner of the king's beauty contest, Esther became the queen of King Ahasuerus of Persia. Esther later risked her life to prevent Haman, the king's prime minister, from carrying out his plot to kill all Jews.

Did you know that the name of Purim comes from a Persian word for lottery, pur? Lots were cast to determine the date when Jewish people could be killed by their enemies (see Esther 3:5-7). Genocide seems to be a strange reason to throw a national party. We find it hard to digest this information--that Israel's national destiny would be determined through the casting of lots. Yet, the underlying truth is that G-d was in control of Israel's destiny even during those dark days.

In Susa, the capital of Persia, in the year 400 BCE, the Jewish people were a minority, exiled in a foreign land. Before Haman's appointment as prime minister, they were mostly left alone. Haman, however, began a crusade to annihilate the Jewish people--ethnic cleansing was not invented in our century! Why did he have such a passionate hatred for Jewish people? Selfish ambition, greed, and genetics.

Haman felt that everything was under control in his march to gain power and wealth as the number-two man under King Ahasuerus. Everybody understood how important he was, except Mordechai, who as a Jew, refused to bow down to him. An insane hatred welled up within Haman against the Jews--he was after all an Agagite.... A what? Haman's great-great-great (ancestor) was Agag, the King of the Amalekites, the sworn enemies of Israel. This hereditary enmity toward Israel was fueled by Israel's arch-enemy Satan, and ignited in an attempt to destroy not only Mordechai, but millions of Jewish men, women, and children.

As the first Purim approached, the Jewish people had every reason to despair. In fact, anyone reading the book carefully will notice that G-d is not even mentioned in the book of Esther.

Mordechai responded to the news of impending Jewish extermination with mourning--tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes, and wailing loudly and bitterly in public. Yet, Mordechai realized that somewhere in the picture, G-d was alive and well and that He had placed Queen Esther, a Jewess, in a position of favor with King Ahasuerus for "such a time as this".

In Esther 4:16&17, we find that Queen Esther, along with the entire Jewish community in Susa, fasted and prayed on that day that G-d would avert the disaster (a "holocaust"). For that reason, the Jewish people have, from that day forth, engaged in a day of fasting, three days before Purim. Today, this fast is observed only by the very orthodox.

As we read and re-read the story, we see G-d behind the scenes, guiding the drama, and in crucial moments, He is the One pulling the strings. Haman plots and appears to have the fate of the Jewish people in his hands, but in a flash, his life is over and the lives of Mordechai and his people are spared.