

Of Esther, Hadassah and Turning Things Upside Down

Rabbi Rena Kieval, 2021

It has been a year. Shocking political upheaval, anti-Semitism and racial hatred rearing their ugly heads, and of course, a devastating global pandemic. This week, in our Jewish holiday cycle, Purim marks one year of COVID 19. Purim was the last holiday we celebrated in community, with awareness of the virus just beginning to dawn in our country. This year, in the words of the *Megillah* – so much has been turned upside down - “*na-hapoch hu.*” Everything is topsy-turvy – and topsy-turvy is the essential theme of Purim.

The Book of Esther tells a classic story of deadly hatred towards a Jewish community, really a tale of terror. Yet the *Megillah* is written as a comedy, and we celebrate Purim with humor and silliness. That is the strange brilliance of this holiday. Purim reminds us how things can be turned upside down, can be transformed. So we dress up and try on different identities; and we laugh at a story that should bring us to tears. Perhaps Purim was meant to give hope – or comic relief - to a vulnerable people who for centuries have had to face one Haman after another. Perhaps also, Purim is meant to show us that we too can turn things around, and to inspire us to do so.

We have that power. We can draw that lesson from the arc of Queen Esther’s ancient story, and in our own time, we can draw that lesson from the story of Hadassah, the organization that we honor today, on this Hadassah Shabbat.

Esther’s story is one of transformation. The *Megillah* begins with the men of Shushan issuing a *decree* ordering that every man in the kingdom will rule with full authority in his home. It is illegal for a woman to disagree with a man! Women are put in their place, spending *months* putting on make-up and grooming themselves for the king’s beauty contest.

Enter Esther. At first, she perfectly fits the mold established for the women of Shushan. She is passive and voiceless; she speaks no lines. The text calls her “shapely and beautiful,” and tells us that she is ‘taken’ from her home to the beauty contest, and then ‘taken’ to the harem in the king’s palace. She is passive. And she conceals her Jewish identity, her true self – and her true name, Hadassah.

In the palace, Esther is silent, and does “as Mordechai instructs.” But as trouble is brewing, a new Esther begins to emerge. She becomes an actor in the story, eventually the lead actor. She proactively investigates, and learns of the plot against the Jews. Then *she* instructs Mordechai, as she develops her strategy to rescue her people. Drawing on her courage, her smarts, and her position inside the palace, Esther becomes the force which defeats Haman and his cohorts.

As befits the theme of Purim, everything gets overturned – “*nahapoch hu*” -the weak become powerful, the vulnerable Jews are saved, and Haman is destroyed on the very gallows he built for Mordechai. And the book which began with a royal mandate for women to be quiet

and obey orders, ends with Esther as a powerful leader who comes out of hiding. She has stood up to evil, saved her people *and* apparently disrupted an oppressive social order.

At the end of the book, Esther and Mordechai share equally in leadership of the Jewish community: the *Megillah* tells us that both have “full authority” as they establish the customs of Purim. But it is Esther alone who gets the naming rights to the book. It is the story of Esther that highlights the lesson that the weak can become strong, that hierarchies of power can be overturned. Thus the Jewish story of Esther is also a universal story: a story about women, about ethnic hatred, about racial prejudice, about all who are marginalized and vulnerable. It is all one story that reminds us that if anybody in a society is not free, or not safe, then none of us is truly free or safe.

Today we say Zachor – remember! - and to remember is more than something we do in our heads. Remembering demands taking action as Queen Esther did, and as the remarkable women of the Hadassah Zionist Women’s Organization have done for the past **109** years. Hadassah was founded at Purim time, drawing inspiration from Esther, and openly carrying her original Jewish name. As its national president Rhoda Smolow, recently noted, when Hadassah was founded in 1912, women in the US did not even have the right to vote. Certainly much has been turned around since then, but there is always more to do.

In the true spirit of Esther the queen, the women of Hadassah are an example of *‘na-hapoch hu’*, of positive transformation and strength. We honor its rescue work during two world wars, and its crucial role in helping establish the state of Israel from its fledgling days to the present. We honor Hadassah’s advocacy for gender equality, for women’s health and health equity in this country, and its fight against anti-Semitism and hatred the world over.

Most famously, of course, Hadassah was, and continues to be, a major force in providing world class health care, research, education and social welfare across Israel, through the renowned Hadassah hospitals and numerous educational and social service programs. Today, together with communities across our Northern New England region, we celebrate 109 amazing years of Hadassah’s work for healing and hope, and we pray that Hadassah will go from strength to strength.

Before and after the fun and laughter of Purim this week, let us follow the example of strong women heroes and work to turn things upside down in the best possible ways. Let us pray that then, as Esther did in Shushan, we will come to see a world filled with light and gladness, joy and celebration, *‘ora, v’simchah, v’sasone v’eekear.’*

Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim