

**SHABBAT SERMON**  
**FEBRUARY 27, 2010**  
**RABBI MITCHELL WOHLBERG**

*The Assault on Purim*

There is a war going on and I'm not afraid to take sides. The festival of Purim is under attack and I refuse to remain silent!

Tonight we usher in the festival of Purim. Purim is one of the happiest days in the Jewish calendar. It's a day on which we eat and drink and celebrate the story of Queen Esther – the hidden Jew who, under the guidance of Mordechai, turns the tables on Haman who seeks to destroy the Jewish people. While the story took place in Persia in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, it is one that has resonated and been celebrated through the ages, with Haman, a descendant of Amalek, representing all those over the centuries who sought to destroy the Jews. Esther and Mordechai were the heroes of the Jewish people then – and ever since.

But not anymore! There is an article in this month's issue of Commentary Magazine entitled, "The Problem with Purim." Purim has become a problem for many Jews who are trying to re-write or reinterpret the story. As the author of the article points out, Esther has become a problem for feminists who see her as simply going along with what Mordechai had told her ... the typical subservient woman. Who is the real heroine of the story? From the perspective of these feminists it is Vashti, the Queen who refused to display herself at the banquet her husband, King Ahasuerus, was holding. One Jewish feminist writer says, "Why aren't we insisting that our synagogue community cheer and stomp their feet at the mention of Vashti's name? She is the foremother in the best sense of the word – assertive, appropriate, courageous." Why don't we? Because our rabbis tell us that Vashti was the great-granddaughter of the man who destroyed Jerusalem. Our rabbis tell us that Vashti was not only a licentious person but she also used to beat her Jewish handmaidens. That's why! But then again, what did the rabbis know? Margorie Garber, teaching at Harvard, sees the Purim story as a parallel of the Clinton/Lewinsky affair. In her words: "Hilary is Vashti, the headstrong proto-feminist queen and Monica, needless to say, is Esther, the beautiful Jewess." Vashti is Hilary? Esther is Monica? For that you have to go to Harvard?

But this is not the only part of the Purim story that is under attack. Much more dangerous is the attack by Jews and non-Jews alike who have a problem with the Purim story. You know what the problem is? We won! Haman sought to destroy us and instead we destroyed him! The people of Persia sought to destroy us, and instead we destroyed them! Tamara Cohen writes, "We cannot ignore the fact that it is Esther who asked the king for the additional day on which the Jews can kill their enemies. We must challenge ourselves to find a way to celebrate Esther's power without necessarily endorsing the violence she authorizes."

Esther and the Purim story will survive this contemporary assault on it. But I am more concerned about the world's survival. You see, this attack on the violence of the Purim story is symptomatic of a mind-set that has taken hold in many corners of the civilized world. Having suffered through the horrors of WWII, many of the people and leaders of Western European

countries have turned into pacifists – seeing all war as being wrong and believing that all differences are simply a matter of negotiation and compromise. I recently read about a statue of General Sir Arthur Harris that stands in London. Gen. Harris was the head of the British bomber forces during WWII. After the German blitzkrieg of British and European cities, it was Gen. Harris who led the British bomber forces that retaliated against the German cities. To honor him, a statue was erected and he was made a Lord. But you know what? These days, in many British circles, he is referred to as being “Bomber Harris” and his statue is oftentimes defaced because many Brits today believe that the retaliation on Germany was immoral. The Germans, in their bombing raids, had killed over 50,000 civilians. But the retaliation was immoral!

We are living in a world that is so upset that passports were forged and a leading Palestinian terrorist was assassinated in Dubai despite the fact that he was a brutal terrorist murderer who was arranging means to kill more Jews! Indeed, here in America, we are no longer supposed to call it a “war” on terrorism. Our Secretary of Homeland Security doesn’t like calling it “terrorism,” that’s too “saber-rattling,” preferring instead to call it, “man-made disaster.”

That is the thinking that has taken hold by many who claim that America is foolish to threaten Iran over its nuclear ambitions ... that just as we learned to live with Russia having nuclear arms we have to accept the fact that Iran can have them as well. And those who say that America must, if all else fails, attack Iran are simply “war mongers.” The current issue of the prestigious magazine, *Foreign Affairs*, has as its cover story: “After Iran Gets the Bomb.” We haven’t done anything yet to stop Iran’s nuclear pursuit and yet people in and out of government are already making their peace with it. Indeed, even when it comes to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, you very rarely hear anyone calling for “victory.” Defeating an enemy is considered “uncivilized” and so 20<sup>th</sup> century ... not 21<sup>st</sup>. You don’t “defeat” the enemy. You “engage” them!

So what does Jewish tradition say about all this? Let me tell you a story from the Talmud. In the Talmud we are told that Reb Meir used to be annoyed by a bunch of hooligans and the Talmud tells us that Reb Meir prayed for them to die. Reb Meir was considered the most eminent sage of his generation. So there you have it! When someone is evil, they should be killed. But you see, Reb Meir may have been the wisest sage of his generation but he may have been only the *second* smartest person in his house. He was married to a woman named Beruriah who was quite a scholar in her own right. And the Talmud tells us that when Beruriah heard her husband praying for these hooligans to die, she said to him, based on Biblical texts, “Rather than praying for these wicked people to die, wouldn’t it be better if you prayed for their wickedness to cease? Pray that they repent and are wicked no more.” Reb Meir, as I said, was a smart man. So he listened to his wife. So we see one should pray for the removal of wickedness, not for the death of the wicked.

That would be a natural way for us to understand this story, except for the fact that on that very same page in the Talmud we’re told that it was only at the conclusion of the 104<sup>th</sup> psalm that King David proclaimed the word “hallelujah” meaning “praise the Lord.” Only *then* was he so overjoyed. Why was that? Because the end of that 104<sup>th</sup> psalm has the words: “Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth and let the wicked be no more.” The Talmud says, only when King David saw the downfall of the wicked, did he feel the full joy that enabled him to proclaim “hallelujah!” Not the wickedness, but the wicked themselves ... not the evil but the evil-doers themselves have to go!

So who is right Beruriah or King David? You know who may have been the first one to ask this very same question? You're not going to believe it ... it was a man named Haman! Haman finds himself in a situation where the tables have been turned on him. He has to cater to Mordechai's needs and he has to dress and bathe Mordechai and put him on a horse and bring him through town. And you know what the Talmud tells us? That when Haman bent over for Mordechai to climb on top of him to get on the horse, Mordechai gave him a swift kick ... and you can guess where! And Haman turned to Mordechai and asked the question: "Just how far do you Jews have to go when you got your enemy on the run? Here I had sought to destroy you and I end up having to dress you and bathe you and bow down to you. Isn't that enough? Is it not your Bible which teaches, "Rejoice not when your enemy falls?"

And Mordechai's answer to Haman then is just as relevant today. We shouldn't rejoice at the downfall of a wicked person. We should be satisfied when their wickedness has ceased. Beruriah was right ... better than praying that the wicked person die, it would be better to pray for that wicked person to repent. But, that's all when you're dealing with a wicked person who is capable of repenting, who has exhibited some good within them, who has the potential to be rehabilitated. Yes, then it is enough when the wickedness is brought to an end. But when you're dealing with a person like Haman whom the Bible tells us, "desired to kill and destroy every single Jewish person – young and old, little children and women." When you're dealing with a person of such enormous evil, with such a person stopping their evil is not enough; you've got to stop them and totally humiliate them once and for all, or else they may rear their ugly heads once again.

The world must take this lesson to heart! We as Jews must take this lesson to heart! The threat that Israel faces today from Iran is nothing new; it goes all the way back to Purim. Iran's President Ahmadinejad is another Haman reincarnated. There is no negotiation with such a person. Robert Wistrich, the noted historian, writes in his new book, "A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism From Antiquity to the Global Jihad,:" "For all the Iranian ruling echelon, eradicating Israel has become a declared foreign policy aim and acquiring nuclear weapons is central to its implementation ... The Shia Martyrdom Syndrome differentiates the Iranian nuclear weapons program from that of all other countries and makes it uniquely threatening." You know what Ahmadinejad wants to do? The Megillah says it: "He seeks to destroy and eradicate all of the Jews, young and old, women and children alike." One should not hesitate or be ashamed to call for his downfall. One should not be such a pacifist or a liberal to allow him to continue.

Recently, Elie Wiesel spoke about Iran's nuclear drive and its President's holocaust denying and Israel threatening statements and he said, "I wouldn't cry if I heard that Ahmadinejad was assassinated." That statement bothered some people, some Jews. Joseph Aaron, editor of the Chicago Jewish Times, whose opinion I usually respect, must have started his Purim drinking early when he wrote last week about Elie Wiesel's statement: "I gotta admit I was saddened to hear him say that. No, not because I care a whit about Ahmadinejad. He is a nauseating little creep and I frankly wouldn't get all that upset either if he left the world stage by whatever means. But it's one thing for me, a hot-headed insignificant columnist, to opine thus, and quite another for Elie Wiesel, Nobel Prize winner, Holocaust survivor, someone who has been a courageous clarion voice of morality and humanity and decency in the world, a symbol of goodness. I don't think Elie should talk like that. I think he should leave that kind of talk to others."

And I say: Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! It is crucially important for people like Elie Wiesel to speak this way. It is the intellectuals, the elites in government, the peace-loving people who must

come to recognize that calling for the downfall of the evil people is the “courageous clarion voice of morality and humanity and decency in the world, a symbol of goodness” that Mr. Aaron calls for.

America dare not go soft ... we Jews dare not go soft. None of us feel good about the plight of the Palestinians. All of us would like to see peace come to them and to the Jews. But we dare not allow sympathy for their plight to weaken our resolve. Akiva Eldar is a respected columnist for the left-leaning, highly thought-of, Haaretz Israeli newspaper. He has been a long time critic of Israel’s policies toward the Palestinians. That’s his prerogative ...but to me it borders on sickness to write what he did about Israel’s recent relief efforts in Haiti. His article was entitled, “Israel’s Compassion in Haiti Can’t Hide Our Ugly Face in Gaza.” He writes: “Don’t feel good my fellow Israelis about what we have done in Haiti, when we haven’t done anything to help the Palestinians next door to us in Gaza.” Do I have to remind Mr. Eldar and others who think like him that the disaster in Haiti was a *natural* one ... while the disaster in Gaza was man-made, created by the people of Gaza themselves! Do I have to remind Mr. Eldar that the people of Haiti have never threatened to destroy the people of Israel, while it is the charter of Hamas that does just that? Do I have to remind Mr. Eldar that the people of Haiti have never shot rockets at Israel, but the people of Gaza have shot 8000 of them. Joel Brinkley, a former Pulitzer Prize winning foreign correspondent for the New York Times writes, “A year after the Israeli invasion of Gaza it is time to stop blaming Israel for the desperate plight of Gaza’s people. Now, without question, it is Hamas’ fault.” Do you hear that, Mr. Eldar? Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, in his recent visit to Israel spoke to the Israeli people with these words: “I want to express my admiration for you ... you created hope and a future for those people (of Haiti) and humanity is proud of you.”

*Humanity* is proud of the Jews ... but not some Jews like Akiva Eldar who believe it’s wrong to try and defeat those who wish to destroy us; not people like those who want to rewrite the Purim story because we had the audacity to fight back and emerge victorious. That story is more relevant now than ever before. As one European journalist wrote in light of the Dubai assassination: “Maybe as the West becomes increasingly gentle and polite and pays monthly direct debits to Amnesty International, we need the Israelis to remind us that the world is not made according to our template.”

There are no people who hunger for peace as much as the Jewish people do. “Shalom” – peace – is the word on our lips throughout our prayers. “*Lu yiheh* – let it be” ... but until it is, let us be strong, let us stand united in overcoming those who seek to destroy us. And as we do, it will be said of us what was eventually said of the Jews in the Purim Megillah: “*La-yehudim hayata orah v’simcha* – for the Jews there was light and rejoicing.” Amen.

© copyright 2010 by Rabbi Mitchell Wohlberg. All rights reserved.

Follow “What the rabbi is reading” at: [rabbiwohlberg.wordpress.com](http://rabbiwohlberg.wordpress.com) and on Twitter: [twitter.com/rabbiwohlberg](https://twitter.com/rabbiwohlberg)