



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Purim 5769 By Rabbi B. Elka Abrahamson

On the 14th of Adar, under the light of the final full moon of winter, Jewish communities around the globe celebrate wildly as Megillat Esther, the Scroll that tells the Purim tale, is chanted in its unique melody. Seated among festively costumed crowds, we cheer for Esther, the cunning beauty who acts in accordance with the advice provided by her pious Uncle Mordechai. The story hinges on a King who, by chance, wakes up in the middle of the night and learns that Mordechai has foiled a plan to kill the King, yet has received no reward. The wicked Haman, planning the death sentence for Mordechai as punishment for his refusal to bow down to him, ends up on the very gallows intended for Mordechai who, on the day designated for the destruction of the Jews, is promoted to a royal position. It is a tale of coincidence, confusion and clever plans. The reading of the Megillah is a rowdy affair, with jeers, shouts and grager-shaking.

At the same time, the Megillah-reading requires both focus and silence from its listeners. Megillat Esther, the only book of the Bible that never mentions the name of God, is also the only book that requires us to hear every single word. In fact, we are taught that if one has not *heard* the entire Megillah, one has not fulfilled his or her obligation. "Listen carefully...do not miss a word," the tradition dictates, "for the Divine can be found between cheers and shouts; it is interwoven among the words and in the whispers of redemptive human actions."

In January, I traveled to Muchucuxcah, Mexico, with 19 students, representing seminaries across the denominational spectrum, who comprised AJWS's 6th Rabbinical Students' Delegation. Our work focused on the improvement of a road. Our only tools were shovels, two wheelbarrows, rocks and piles of sand. The task was physically challenging, and we passed busy mornings in engaging conversation, song and clever word games. Through our banter, we grew in spirit and friendship, deepening our ability to communicate our needs, feelings and frustrations.

Mid-way through the trip, after settling into a routine of clanging shovels and boisterous song, the group decided to experiment with working for a morning in silence. We sought to refocus our energy on the purpose of our labor. Time passed quickly, and we worked with greater productivity. Beyond these practical outcomes, participants found the experience of laboring in silence to be a powerful vehicle for uncovering the sacred in the work, for weaving a Divine purpose into the sound of metal upon rock and endowing with holiness the filling of empty places with mounds of sand. In choosing to work without chatter, we *heard* every detail of the work and could not help but think about the inner meaning of service in a far-away developing community.

I have found returning from an intense AJWS trip to be complicated. The echoes of the experience ring in my heart and head over and over while, at the same time, the tiny village of Muchucuxcah feels distant both in time and space. I have found an unexpected source of comfort in the Purim customs. Noise is very much a tradition of Purim. Masked children enjoy loud carnivals. Synagogues are wildly boisterous as worshippers blot out Haman's name with booing and with the rattling, snarling, grinding sound of the grager.

Yet silence is also a Purim tradition. It is only when we are quiet that we can fulfill the Purim obligation of hearing each word of the Megillah. And it is in silence that we discover the Holy One of Being. Missing from the written word of the Megillah text, God is revealed through human actions rushing in like sand to fill

empty spaces with the Divine Presence. Purim reminds us that there is a time for both the rowdy and the quiet, the messiness of repairing a dirt road in a remote village and the silence of reflection and contemplation.

Purim lore teaches that the gragger can be traced to a practice of scrawling Haman's name on two rocks and banging them together in an effort to erase his name over the course of the Megillah reading. It is a powerful test of patience to bang and file down rock to eliminate evil. And it reminds me, at this season of increasing joy, a lesson I learned in Muchucuxcah—that removing injustice, eradicating unfairness and rooting out evil from the world require ongoing patience, tenacity and the hands to do the heavy lifting.



Rabbi B. Elka Abrahamson is Vice President, Leadership Programs for the Wexner Foundation. She is responsible for the programs, policies, and strategic planning for this major component of the Foundation's activities. She has been published in magazines and journals including *Moment*, *Shma* and the *CCAR Journal*. Rabbi Abrahamson has served on the CCAR's Executive Board, Contracts Committee and Ethics Committee. A member of the Clinical Faculty of HUC-JIR, she also served on its Board of Governors.

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