



CHAG V'CHESED: HOLIDAY DVAR TZEDEK

Purim 5770

Who Knows: Humility and Hope in the Story of Purim By Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld

Megillat Esther is a flamboyant, even farcical tale of good and evil. Its characters are caricatures of human virtue and vice. Haman is the ultimate villain, Achashverosh a fool; Mordechai is an unassailable *tzaddik*, Esther a paragon of virtue and beauty. As children, we are captivated by these characters in all their unambiguous glory. We try on their personae and imagine ourselves as absolutely courageous or cowardly, beautiful or ugly, good or bad. As adults, we learn to laugh at the absurdity of such absolutes, which leave little room for the subtleties and uncertainties of the world as we know it. Yet, a closer look at the *megillah* reveals shades of gray that illuminate our own struggles to act with hope, courage and moral responsibility in a complex and often terrifying world.

I have come to believe that the most important verse in the entire *megillah*—the verse that represents the pivotal turning point in the Purim story—comes near the end of chapter four, when Mordechai sends a message to Esther, urging her to reveal her identity to King Achashverosh and plead on behalf of the Jewish people.

Remarkably, Mordechai's message to Esther hinges on two simple words that promise nothing and change everything. *Mi yodea?* Mordechai says—"Who knows?" *Mi yodea im la'et kazot higa'at la'malchu?*—"Who knows if it wasn't for just such a time that you became queen?"

These are the words that set Esther in motion, that inspire her to take action in spite of her own resistance, in spite of her fears about her own fate, in spite of her doubts about her own position and power in the king's court.

"*Who knows?*" This is hardly the kind of message we look for to motivate us to act with courage in a crisis. We generally look for a message that inspires a little more confidence: "This is precisely why you became queen! Your actions will make all the difference! This is why God put you in this position. Nothing happens without a purpose."

But the world of Purim—not unlike *our* world—is a world without guarantees, certainties and signs from God. It is a world in which we don't know—can't know—the limits or possibilities of our own power. It is a world in which we can't be sure where our actions will lead and whether our efforts will be for naught. It is a world in which, if we are able to discern God's presence at all, it is through our own faltering attempts at courage and compassion.

Often when we say "Who knows?" it's accompanied by a gesture of resignation—a shrug of the shoulders, an upward glance—as if uncertainty or not-knowing relieves us of responsibility. How can we effectively respond to poverty in developing countries? Who knows, it's too complicated for me to get involved. How real is the threat of global warming, and what can we do to address it? Who knows, we just have to wait and see what happens. What can and must we, as Jews, do to end the genocide in Darfur? Who knows, I have no idea what I could do to make a difference. All too often in our own lives, "Who knows?" becomes an excuse for inaction, a pretext for paralysis.

But in this remarkable exchange between Mordechai and Esther, something quite different happens. "Who knows?" becomes not an excuse but an invitation:

Consider the possibility, says Mordechai, that you are here for a reason, that there is something bigger and more important than your fear, that you have more power than you imagine. Consider the possibility that it is up to us to act out of love and responsibility for each other in order to make room for God's presence in this world.

Esther's willingness to act on a possibility is what makes her a prophetess, according to the midrashic tradition. A few verses later, when she enters the king's court, she is frightened, even terrified, and yet prepared to risk her own life. The text of the *megillah* says that "she clothed herself in royal garments," but a linguistic idiosyncrasy in the verse leads the Gemara to suggest that what was really happening in this moment was that "she clothed herself in the *Shekhina*." In other words, this is prophecy from the ground up. Not a heavenly voice intruding in human affairs, but a human being—full of doubts yet determined—bringing God's presence down to earth.

"Who knows if it wasn't for just such a time that you became queen?" This is the legacy that Mordechai and Esther bequeath to us—a dual legacy of humility and hope, of radical uncertainty and radical responsibility.

What are our obligations on this holiday of *hester panim* (the hiddenness of God's face)—this day when we reckon with the ultimate mystery of the Divine? To take care of each other. To send treats to our neighbors and friends. To expand our circle of concern even further, giving gifts to the poor.

Through these small acts we choose interdependence over isolation, responsibility over the retreat into despair. We turn toward each other, and discover the promise of sweetness in the face of uncertainty, and love in the face of fear.

Who knows? Consider the possibility that this is why we are here.



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