

Purim ACT Shabbat Address

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We are in a triple Purim this weekend. Outside of Jerusalem we celebrate on Friday, but in Jerusalem the festivities continue over 3 days, with Shabbat focused on the Purim legends. I will today join with the Jerusalemites in sharing a Purim letter I received from a religious Jewish friend in New York. She is in a corporate leadership position.

Purim is coming, my friend writes. The story that guides me at work. *Don't tell them about your family or religion.*

I used to feel sorry for Esther. She is forced to marry a powerful idiot against her will. From time immemorial women have been forced into all sorts of marriages. That still happens today in many parts of the world. From a Jewish woman's perspective, it's doubly tragic because Esther is forced to marry a non-Jew. Yet she is the cherished heroine of the day.

The book is titled Megillat Esther. It's her story. The story of her interactions with a world where God seems so removed. She is placed in dire circumstances and her courage saves the Jewish people. But Purim doesn't focus on her personal tragedy. It's tricky and meaningless to compare suffering. She wasn't burned at the stake after all. She didn't see her children murdered. But I still feel for her. She found herself in a situation she could never have foreseen. And even so, she held onto her connection to Mordechai, and to her people. Perhaps Esther's precarious situation reflects the precarious situation of Jews in exile, and the situation of all powerless people.

Esther is operating in a non-Jewish environment and a non-female friendly culture with massive

power imbalances. These themes resonate with my reality - albeit to very different degrees!

So says my friend in New York.

This week we heard more from women who had allegedly been raped by a man at a high level in the Australian government. Even women who have leaped over barriers into prestige jobs, can be caught in woman-hating violence. Where can women find guidance, as they climb to places where the atmosphere is thin of women, and dense with powerful men?

Let us look back at the beginning of the book of the Torah we will soon finish, the Book of Exodus. In the entire Bible there is no place with such a dense cluster of women, or such an absence of men, as is found in the opening of Exodus, in the darkness of slavery. Under the spell of a lunatic paranoia, the king of Egypt demands that the Hebrew midwives, Shifra and Puah, kill all the boys as they arrive on the birthing stones. But the midwives fear God, not the king and they let the boys live. When the king calls the midwives to task for failing to obey him, these fearless women come up with a ruse so clever that the king lets them alone. God is pleased with them, and builds them houses.

In the midst of the genocide, a man from the House of Levi takes a wife from that tribe. The woman, woe to her, bears a son. When she can no longer hide him, she prepares a haven to protect him when he is abandoned to the water. What was in her mind as she laid him on the river? What hope did she have that he would survive? But her plan is provident, because Pharaoh's daughter is out bathing with her

maids. The baby's sister appears and offers to find a wet nurse. And so the baby is cared for by his mother, at Pharaoh's expense, for the first years of his life. And then the child returns to the woman who found him and saved him, and she names him Moses. And Moses grows up.

In the merit of righteous women we were redeemed from Egypt, the Talmud tells us. The midrash tells us how the women did this in erotic detail, but I don't know why the midrash is needed. Between Joseph, viceroy to the king of Egypt, and Moses, prince of Egypt, redeemer of Israel, there is not one named male. There are, however, six women, including two named, and all accomplish acts of breathtaking bravery, of hope and of rebellious righteousness.

This is how all six women do it: together. The midwives act together. The mother and sister of Moses plot together. And Pharaoh's daughter is in cahoots with her maid.

If women, and other oppressed people, are to become all they are capable of, they would be wise to learn from Esther and Mordecai, and from the women of Exodus. Working together, we can redeem the world.