

Purim 2026

Purim. On the surface it is perhaps our consummate festival of joy. We wear costumes. We get drunk. We bask in the glow of a great historical victory. And we laugh – at ourselves, at the enemy we have defeated, and at the absurdity of living as a Jew while daring to think of history and victory in the same breadth.

Below the surface, Purim is far more serious. It is known as the holiday of good and evil. This year, due to a war in Iran that began literally two days before the actual holiday of Purim, evil is very much on our minds.

Purim focuses on the Book of Esther, which happens to be the only Biblical book other than the Song of Songs never to mention God by name. That omission reminds us that when it comes to war and peace we can't rely on supernatural help. We need to take matters into our own hands, to use all the resources at our disposal, and – in the immortal words of that great Brooklyn Jew, Al Davis – just win, baby! That principle especially applies to existential wars. That's why those who fight them often compromise their morality in the process.

I wasn't planning on talking about war tonight. I had written an entire talk on a different topic. Then, two days before Purim, Israel and the USA started bombing Iran. America entered this war surely thinking that it would be much like the others we've fought in recent decades. Its battle grounds are thousands of miles from American soil, where we're sure to inflict far more physical damage on the opponent than we sustain ourselves. In theory, such a war can be stopped at any time, and the enemy would be hard pressed to bomb our cities. These are called wars of choice, and there's nothing existential about them, at least not for America. Americans can therefore concentrate our fears primarily on internal threats, including politicians who don't respect our democratic principles. In fact, for many on these shores, no sooner did the bombing begin that the real "enemy," the real "Haman," was the man who without buy-in from Congress decided to go to war, risking our troops and our treasure, and was never trusted to have a clear plan or goal in mind. The fact that this war had an initial approval rating in America of only 40% is unheard of in our lifetimes.

As you know, this talk is being given nearly a fortnight after the actual holiday of Purim. That was the day I went on social media and posted my initial thoughts on the war. Looking back at that post, I can see it was the product of an American mind. I spoke quite critically about America's adversary, arguing that no regime deserves to be attacked more than that one. But I also questioned the war's legality in terms of the Constitution. Or whether anything short of regime change would be a failure, given the potential costs of leaving this murderous regime humiliated, devastated, and yet entirely in power. Or whether implementing regime change is even possible, let alone likely. Or how we can have faith in

our leaders to communicate honestly about how and why this war is being waged. What I wrote was unremarkable for any critic of President Trump, even for one who is willing to agree with him that Iran's regime is a singular threat to the prospects of a peaceful Middle East and that only a fool wouldn't see such peace as being in America's interests. What I wrote, however, could have been written by a gentile. And that bothers me. Because at a time like this, it is also important to note how this war feels for me as a Jew.

As a Jew, I find it impossible to disassociate this war from the time of year when it began – the weekend before Purim. Purim forces us to confront face-to-face the epitome of antisemitism and evil in the figure of Haman. But as we know, Haman is but a link in a tragically long chain symbolized by the Biblical term, Amalek. That term originally referred to a nomadic people who became the Jews' archenemies. Over time, Amalek has come to be understood as a metaphor for senseless, existentially-threatening antisemitism. The Amalekites are also known for having both prominent ancestors and descendants. The most prominent ancestor to the Amalekites was Esau; the most prominent descendent was Haman.

Today, when we think of Amalek, we think also of the ancient Romans, the Inquisition, and the Nazis. Some would add the Palestinians, but that ignores the fact that the Jews and Palestinians have been fighting over the same small piece of land to which both have a legitimate claim and neither has clean hands. The Palestinians are not Amalek. Nor, I would argue, are the Iranians. But what about Iran's leaders? That is a question I want to pose tonight. For decades, they've been agents of chaos throughout the Middle East, holding a specially poisoned spear for Israel and the Jewish people, including its civilians, all of whom they seem to treat as legitimate targets. These leaders, after all, are largely responsible for Hamas, whose indiscriminate slaughter on October 7th was aimed at Israel's most vulnerable and peaceful residents. And lest anyone think of the Iranian leaders purely as Zionophobes, don't forget that they've been the world's leading proponent of the idea that the Holocaust never happened. Please don't be fooled by the herd animals on the left who shrug off the Iranian threats. For a while now, the regime in Tehran has resolved to kill as many Israelis as possible and to remove from the map the Jewish State. As a Jew, then, I need to ask the question: are these leaders and their regime Amalek? I'll provide my answer at the end of this talk.

Americans by and large have the luxury of looking at the war in Iran simply as folly, wonder when it will end, and hope the price of oil doesn't go up too far or their stocks don't crater. As a Jew, however, I cannot avoid thinking about how this is playing out in Israel. There you find family after family camped out in underground stairwells and train stations and wondering if the next direct missile hit will be on their homes. You might think that given

those consequences, the Israelis would especially oppose this war. But at least at the outset, they're virtually all in support – 93 percent of Israeli Jews is the reported number. After decade upon decade of fighting, they've grown so desperate to see the Iranian regime defeated that they have no trouble calling them Amalek and cheering anything that weakens their enemy. To Israelis, the dream of total regime change in Iran must feel like Noah dreaming of a rainbow.

As an American, I might be tempted to see Israel as the nation that's treating my own as its puppet, pushing our impressionable, glory-seeking and naïve leader into a fool's errand purely for *their* sake, whereas all it will do for ours is sacrifice some troops, deplete our weapons and undermine our economy. As a Jew, however, I see Israel sympathetically, as a nation facing multifaceted existential threats. Some of those threats come from its own corrupt and extremist leaders. But others arise from the missiles and bullets that Iran and its proxies seem hell bent to fire, as well as from a devastatingly effective public relations attack against the very notion of a Jewish state. As a Jew who recognizes the toxicity of rampant terrorism, be it internal or external, I see both the Iranian and Israeli people in much the same way – victims of forces beyond their control, passionate for security and freedom but powerless to find either. We can only imagine how enslaved both communities must feel by the forces of evil. For who is free in the streets of Tehran or the underground stairwells of Haifa? And who in these nations can possibly know what it means to feel secure? The very concept must by now seem utopian.

Recounting these bleak facts, it is no wonder so many people over time turn to supernaturalism and to the view that salvation will come only with the help of divine providence. But today's Jews live in a time after the Holocaust, when we saw the calls for providence go unanswered six million times over. This is why, for many if not most of us, we feel left to our own devices – seeing ourselves as the sources of our redemption, if indeed we are to be redeemed.

In that regard, we find the holiday of Purim instructive. You might call this holiday a celebration of humanistic Judaism, not in the narrow sense of being atheistic but in the broader one of assigning to our own species responsibility for our fate. Chapter 4 of the Book of Esther is the key. Just before that chapter began, we were told that the king had delegated the wicked Haman control over the Jews' fate, and that in the king's name, Haman ordered every Jew, regardless of age or gender, to be exterminated. Chapter 4 starts with the obvious consequence – upon learning their fate, the Jews generally reacted by weeping, wailing, and lying in sackcloth and ashes. But Mordecai had a plan, and it involved his cousin and adopted daughter, Esther. Esther, we had learned, was a “shapely and beautiful maiden” when she was taken into the king's harem, but on Mordecai's advice

had not revealed her Jewish lineage. With the passage of time, Esther came to so impress the king that he took her as his wife, but still, even as queen, she would not reveal her lineage. Now, once Mordecai learned of Haman's wicked plot, he used an intermediary to approach Esther and asked her to appeal to the king on behalf of the Jewish people. Esther responded that anyone who enters the king's presence without having been summoned would then be killed, and she had not been summoned. It was at that point that Mordecai dispatched one of the more famous messages in the Tanakh: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

The Jewish people of today have not attained to royal position. But we find ourselves in such a crisis. Our people in Israel are clearly at risk from all quarters – externally, internally, you name it. And we American Jews should not imagine that we can wash our hands of Israel and have it not affect us. Most importantly, we'd be wise to remember that perhaps we are alive today for just such a crisis. We hold some responsibility for getting out of it. Not a Heavenly God, but we, the Jewish people and the Judeophiles of the world, however tiny their number may be. We are not powerless any more than Mordecai or Esther was powerless. As a poker player might say, all we need to defeat Haman or any other force of evil is a chip and a chair.

One message of Purim is that Judaism has survived thanks to courageous people, people who recognize that they can make a difference. A Jewish life well lived is not characterized by comfort but by answering the call. *Hineni*, Mordecai all but proclaimed, as did Esther. *Hineni* – "Here I am." This word was used by Abraham, Moses, Samuel, and their audience was always the same: God. In Purim, God doesn't appear, explicitly, but God lurks. God inspires. God reminds us that Jews are here to honor the divine name – to risk even our lives, as Esther did, when a true crisis presents itself.

Of course, I cannot help but utter those words and be reminded of all the people in this world, Jew and Gentile alike, who see being at risk during a crisis as a license to kill. And I am also reminded of all the American Jews who believe that the only card Israel and America have to play right now is the card that says death, and in this case, we would serve as its angel. But they are forgetting perhaps another central lesson of Purim, one that is best symbolized by Purim's approach to alcohol consumption.

In Orthodox communities, Jews are taught to drink alcohol on Purim up to the line where we barely know the difference between the good Mordecai and the evil Haman, but we *always* stay on the side of the line represented by Mordecai. In other words, whereas the

lessons of Purim may be largely about confronting evil, the holiday – and indeed, our religion as a whole -- must always focus primarily not on evil, but on goodness.

It sounds trite to point out such a fact. Trite, that is, until you reflect on just how small a correlation there is between being a would-be warrior for justice and being a warm, kind and generous person. When we focus on Trump or Netanyahu, we are reminded that courage and spirit, without compassion and judgment, is combustible. Mordecai remains a Jewish hero not simply because he fought Amalek, but because he was a mensch. And in thinking about Purim, it is Mordecai – and menschlichkeit -- that deserves our thoughts even more than Haman.

How do we locate goodness or menschlichkeit? It might be instructive to consider their opposite, evil. We identify evil through acts of ugliness, acts marked by violence and hatred, and much of that begins with fear. During a time of crisis like this one, it's easy for Jews to become paranoid, see antisemitism around every corner, and assume the worst of people. Netanyahu is the kind of ruler who inspires support from folks consumed with those attitudes. He feeds off a wide range of pain-based emotions, and the more of our hatred and fear he eats, the more willing he is to bomb and alienate. Mordecai needed a weapon to fight Haman. But what he chose was entirely opposite to what Netanyahu offers. Mordecai chose Esther's beauty. And given that the king had a whole harem to pick from, it's reasonable to assume he selected her as queen because Esther's beauty wasn't simply skin deep. That means that she would have traded first and foremost in making people happy and loving, not fearful.

It's great to have chutzpah, street smarts, and the wisdom to identify your true enemies and guard against them. But those can't be the most dominant characteristics of Jewish people if we hope to survive in this world. We are, after all, not only the people of Mordecai and Esther, but also the people of Heschel, Buber, the Baal Shem Tov, Rabbi Akiva, Hillel, and dare I say, Jesus of Nazareth. In the words of the Prophet Isaiah, they were "a light unto the nations," with hearts as capacious as their heads. The Judaism they preached was welcoming, not threatening, egalitarian, not hierarchical, unifying, not dividing. Due to one Amalekite after another, the Jewish herd has been gravely thinned over the centuries to the point where a wagon-circling strategy is easily attacked, as if we are intentionally subjecting ourselves to a pincer movement. Those people I mentioned offer a different approach. It's the path of love but not escapism, of engagement, but not hostility. It is the path of Judaism as a primarily universalist faith, not a tribal folk. We might not have the luxury of avoiding this path if we want to survive. Because if all you do is try to eradicate enemies, you'll soon find, as the American military has been finding in Iran, that there's a never-ending supply of them.

“Do not imagine that you, all of the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace,” said Mordecai, adding that “relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter.” Well, I am not so sure about that latter comment. In fact, I would tell my fellow Jews and other Judeophiles, not to imagine that this people, who have survived for thousands of years, will survive much longer (except as religious fundamentalists) if either Israel is destroyed or antisemitism engulfs the world. That message is difficult to hear, but far less difficult than the one Mordecai heard when Haman issued his proclamation. There are always solutions, or at least it is the Jewish way to believe that. And we would be wise to think of ourselves as being put on this earth to find and implement those solutions. We need to assume responsibility for dealing with this crisis personally. We can’t leave it to Netanyahu, Trump, or whatever murderous antisemite emerges as the next Supreme Leader of Iran. Fortunately, we have more than a chip and a chair. We have the Tanakh, the Talmud, common sense, the faculty of reason, the faculty of love, and a whole lot of people who would join us if we have good ideas. Plus, we have the inspiration of Rahm Emanuel, who reminded us: “never let a serious crisis go to waste.” Out of the ashes of Amalek, after all, we came up with Hamantaschen.

So, as we reflect on Purim this year, we in America might want to take on a challenge. What can we do about antisemitism? And what can we say about Amalek? To me, any response to antisemitism must begin by serving as an ambassador for our people. The last time I checked, Lincoln was a commander and chief who didn’t back down from an existential fight. But he always remained an exemplar for the American people; he symbolized all the best values of America. We as Jews, here and in Israel, now face all sorts of threats, from missiles, at the one extreme, to demands to renounce the very existence of Israel, on the other. We can’t please all of our critics. But what we can do is live our lives as Jewish ambassadors. Engage in dialogue, show your compassion, show your universalism, but don’t whitewash antisemitism either. Also, don’t give up on the Israelis. Their state was created to offer a homeland for a people who deserved one after 1900 years of persecution and discrimination, and yet they’ve had a target on their backs ever since. Show the Israelis the same compassion that you’re asking them to show others. Don’t fall into the trap of accepting the trendy idea that all the countries of the world, Iran included, can remain on the map but one – the one with the Jewish majority. Further, take stock in what it means to have enemies, for the Jews do have them, and as we see on Purim, sometimes we have to fight them. The key is to do it humanely. Just look at things this way: precisely because antisemitism is real and antizionism is growing like weeds, do you actually think that the Jewish state can afford to treat people inhumanely and get away with it? Would that not be suicidal behavior? Finally, to all the Jews in America and in Israel, I offer this simple thought – like charity, regime change needs to begin at home.

As for thinking of the Iranian leaders as Amalek, this is where we must be careful. And this is where I must answer that thinking of a rival nation as Amalek is a bridge too far. Some words have incredible power. “God” immediately comes to mind. “Amalek” is another – and it would appear that its primary power is to so condemn an adversary that any amount of military might used against it can be rationalized. Hence, the destruction of Gaza.

Yes, Jews are commanded to defend ourselves and defend others against would be murderers. We can quote the Talmud in saying that “If someone comes to kill you, kill him first.” Or the Mishnah Torah’s commandment to save a person being pursued for his life, even if it means killing the pursuer and even if the pursuer is a minor. But we had better also take note of 1 Samuel 15:3, where God says, “Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses.” No, that’s not exactly how the IDF treated the Gazans, but the reality is far closer to that outcome than it should have been. And this is what happens when you dehumanize your adversary – you forget the principle to always, even in wartime, stay on the side of Mordecai, rather than Haman. One thing is for sure: we are hard wired to think of Amalek as less than human. Its connotations of pure, unadulterated evil require us to blot out any empathy with it. And that’s when we go too far.

Evil is something we had better take seriously. That’s one reason we have Purim. Laugh, drink, dress up, contemplate the beauty of Esther or the wisdom of Mordecai. Just don’t forget Haman. Or the commandment to engage in self-defense. But also, don’t forget how dangerous it is to get completely carried away by the symbol of Amalek. And above all, recognize what kind of balancing act is required of us – to fight, but also to empathize, and never to dehumanize a child of Adam and Eve. Ultimately, theirs is the tribe that matters most.