

## Purim – Beyond the Grogger

It's easy to see Purim as the classic children's holiday. Costumes, noise, good guys and noble queens, and the baddest bad guy imaginable.

I hope you know the story. The Jews are happily living in Persia (today Iran) and are so assimilated into society that a Jew, Mordecai, can be a respected member of the community (and, at the end of the story, Prime Minister) and a Jew (Esther) can be Queen. We suspect that they are assimilated since (according to Rabbi Irving Greenberg writing in his wonderful book, *The Jewish Way*) they are probably named after Marduk, a Babylonian god and Ishtar a Babylonian goddess, respectively (the modern equivalent might be Mary and Christopher). When Mordecai refuses to bow down to the evil Prime Minister Haman, Haman requests and receives permission to kill all the Jews. Mordecai convinces Esther to plead for her people and so, against the odds and her better judgment (her predecessor, Vashti, had been deposed for acting too independently), she asks the king for her life and the life of her people the Jews. Haman is defeated and the Jews are saved. As we read the story, we cheer Esther and Mordecai and hiss and boo the evil Haman.

So what are the lessons for us some 2500 years later. Here are a few ideas:

1. No matter how safe we think we have it in the Diaspora, we can never fully relax. The Jews of Persia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE felt as secure as the Jews of German and Poland in our 20<sup>th</sup> century. In both cases a turn of leadership meant genocide.
2. Never write off assimilated Jews. Mordecai and Esther, assimilated Jews of their age, saved the Jewish people.
3. God works through people. One of the interesting facts about the Book of Esther (a book of the Bible currently on your shelf – read it why don't you?) is that God is not directly mentioned! The hand of God is clear in the story but it remains in between the lines. Just like today in our own lives!
4. All Jews are in it together. Haman does not decide just to murder Mordecai, or even all “non-bowing” Jews or even all religious Jews. He decides to do away with all Jews. Does this remind you of anyone else? All Jews are brothers and sisters. Those that would destroy us would not single out Orthodox Jews or Conservative Jews or Reform Jews. We must remain one strong people!

We can and should respond to life with joy and humor. We might imagine that Purim could be a much more sober holiday observing the near destruction of Persia's Jews.