



Jewish Community Center of Paramus

Congregation Beth Tikvah

304 E. Midland Avenue ~ Paramus NJ 07652 ~ 201.262.7691

A Shabbat Message from Rabbi Arthur Weiner

Friday, February 19, 2021 ~ Torah Portion: Terumah ~ Shabbat Zachor

Dear JCCP/CBT Family,

When the month of Adar arrives, there is an abundance of joy. Although it's February, and the weather is still cold, a certain groundhog in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania tells us that spring is but several weeks away. Our attention turns to the Hebrew month of Adar, and our wonderful holiday of Purim which begins next Thursday night, February 25. It's a good time to reflect on this holiday.

Remember all the stories about Esther and Mordechai that we learned in Hebrew school? While all true, let's ask ourselves one question. Why did Mordechai refuse to bow to Haman, thus initiating the conflict that dominates the story?

"All the king's subjects at the king's gate would bow down and prostrate to Haman, for such was the king's order concerning him, but Mordechai would not kneel or bend low" (Esther 3:2-3).

I have always been struck by the significance of Mordechai's refusal to bow to Haman. Traditional Jewish exegesis proudly explains Mordechai's courageous action based on some blanket Jewish prohibition against the simple act of bowing before anything other than Almighty G-d. Yet that cannot serve as an adequate answer when we consider the many other places in the Bible where heroes prostrated before their fellow. The answer to this question is to be found elsewhere.

I have come to believe that Mordechai understood the type of person that Haman was. He understood the values that motivated Haman, and the type of leadership he would offer the people of Persia. And Mordechai wanted no part of it. Mordechai's refusal to bow before Haman was not some act of misplaced piety, but rather, a conscious act of civil disobedience. It was a statement of fealty to a basic principle of monotheistic faith. One who understands that there exists a transcendent moral code can never honor, acknowledge, or make an accommodation with evil. Mordechai knew what Haman was all about, and was willing to put his values on the line. He had the courage of his religious convictions, and was willing to make them known among the others who sat at the king's gate. He was similarly ready to suffer the consequences of them if necessary. It is a lesson worth considering.

Though there is much in the story of Purim that all people can relate to, it is this aspect that perhaps offers the most universal appeal of this story of Purim, and the greatest challenge to each of us. Every day of our lives, each of us confronts evil in all of its disparate forms. How do we respond to the challenge it poses? What steps are we willing to take against the ills that afflict our society, and often corrupt its members? How do we fight against the daily sanctification of what we all know intuitively to be wrong? Do we go with the flow, or are we willing to take risks for righteousness, as did Mordechai?

Purim is a holiday characterized by behaviors, antics, and observances that seem almost silly. Dressing in costumes, shaking groggers, and making noise are all part of the traditions that add to the joy of the day. Yet Purim has a serious side as well. When challenged, and beset by threats, the Jews of ancient Shushan were forced to take a stand for their faith, and their cherished values. That they did so, despite the risks to their position in society struck a responsive chord among Jewish communities throughout the world, as we still celebrate their deeds, and recount their story each year. Let me take this opportunity to wish you a joyous, wonderful Purim. I look for to celebrating it with you.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Arthur Weiner