

We All Need Some Time in Achashverosh's Palace

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Tomorrow, I'm heading down to Miami for a 50th-birthday trip with my best childhood friends.

It's going to be epic. Five 50-year-old dudes having fun in the sun.

Four of us are pretty square: a rabbi, a doctor, a lawyer, and a CEO. I, for one, will be bringing my BIPAP sleep machine with me.

But one of our buddies is actually very cool. He lives down in Miami. He's a talent manager and concert promoter for Latino musicians.

His nickname—and I kid you not, this is what comes up on my phone when he texts—is "El Judío"—"The Jew."

I've heard him on the phone negotiating concert deals. It's awesome. It's exactly what you're imagining right now.

Anyway, El Judío is in charge of our nightlife activities, so I won't be surprised if things get a little crazy.

Maybe I shouldn't be telling you this.

But hey, Purim is coming up next weekend! And the goal of Purim is to be wild and crazy.

Seriously. It's a *halakhic* requirement.

The famous statement of the Talmud: "Rava said: One is obligated to get drunk on Purim to the point that he or she cannot distinguish between 'Cursed is Haman' and 'Blessed is Mordechai.'" (Megillah 7b)

Rabbi Moses Isserles, the great Ashkenazi *halakhic* authority, elaborates: "It is a custom to wear masks on Purim, and for a man to wear a woman's dress and for a woman to wear men's garments."

Clearly not a sensitive thing to say by 21st-century standards, but in the 16th century the point was clear: Purim is a day when everything is turned upside down and inside out and the normal rules of life are abandoned. And Rabbi Isserles continues, "There is no prohibition in this, because our only intention [on Purim] is happiness—*simchah*." (Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 696:8¹)

But the word *simchah*, as it's used here, has a particular meaning, according to Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: When it comes to Purim, he explains, *simchah* means "good-hearted fun and unrestricted hilarity."²

It's an outward joy, which is expressed in raucous partying, acting silly, eating, drinking, and being just plain ridiculous. Basically what, at the University of Texas, we called, "Saturday night."

So, that's exactly what we're going to do next Saturday night on Erev Purim. "Shushan Night Live!" We're going to have a ton of fun!

But Soloveitchik explains that this *simchah* of Purim is a peculiar kind of happiness commanded by the *halakhah* on this one specific occasion. Normally, we use *simchah* when we're talking about more spiritually significant things, like weddings and b'nai mitzvah and lofty holidays like Passover and Sukkot.

This kind of *simchah*—what Rabbi Soloveitchik calls "true joy"—"is an internal experience...a *quiet, meditative* experience." ³

This *simchah*, he says, "expresses itself in an inner feeling of peace of mind and serenity, harmony, and tranquility."

Joy of this kind, Soloveitchik maintains, "can be experienced only when the person is in the presence of God."⁴

Which brings me to our parashah this week.

As if we haven't heard enough about this yet, Parashat P'kudei talks extensively about...wait for it...the design and decor of the *mishkan*! Yes, it seems that some ancient interior decorator made off with the scribe's pen and had a field day.

"Let's see, over here we're going to hang some 'gold, silver, and copper; blue, purple, and crimson yarns, fine linen, and goats' hair.' And over here, we'll put some 'tanned ram skins, dolphin skins, and acacia wood.'

"Oh, and you know what would go great over here? How about some 'oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense.' And we absolutely can't forget the 'lapis lazuli and other stones for setting, for the ephod and the breast piece.' " (Ex. 35:5-9)

Blah, blah, blah; on and on we go.

It would be completely uninteresting if it weren't for one thing: The decor of the *mishkan* in Parashat P'kudei is strikingly similar to the decor of King Achashverosh's palace in the *Book of Esther*. Very timely, right?

Here's the description of the palace:

"There were hangings of white cotton and blue wool, caught up by cords of fine linen and purple wool to silver rods and alabaster columns; and there were couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pearl, and mosaics." (*Est.* 1:6)

Clearly, this cannot be coincidental.

Or maybe it's totally coincidental.

But in any case, we're going to make meaning out of it.

The fact that these two structures—Achashverosh's palace and the *mishkan*—are so similar in their design and decor says to me that they are literary foils for each other.

- Achashverosh's palace is a home for a mortal king. The *mishkan* is a home for the divine King, *Melekh ha-olam*.

- Achashverosh's palace is a place for external, physical joy, as it says:

"In the third year of his reign, [Achashverosh] gave a banquet. ...For no fewer than 180 days, he displayed the vast riches of his kingdom. ...Royal wine was served in abundance, as befits a king, in golden beakers, beakers of varied design. And the rule for the drinking was, 'No restrictions!' For the king had given orders to every palace steward to comply with each man's wishes." (*Est.* 1:4-5, 7-8)

- By contrast, the *mishkan* is a place for internal, sublime joy, as it says: "When you have gathered in the yield of your land...you shall take the product of hadar trees, branches of palm trees, boughs of leafy trees, and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before Adonai your God seven days." (*Lev.* 23:39-40)

- Achashverosh's palace is a place for hedonism and indulgence of carnal desires. The *mishkan* is a place for humility and generosity of the spirit.

The palace and the *mishkan*—at once so similar in design and yet so opposite in purpose—point, I think, to a tension inherent in the human condition.

On the one hand, we, like Achashverosh and his merry guests, are drawn to the fleeting pleasures of the material world.

The 20th-century Jewish French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argues that this inclination governs the "moral attitudes" of modern Western culture. Modern man, he writes, "is for an open life, eager to try everything, to experience everything, 'in a hurry to live. Impatient to feel.'

"In this respect," says Levinas, "we Jews all try to be Westerners.

"[W]e cannot close ourselves off to any possibility. We cannot let life pass us by!"⁵

On the other hand, we know there is something bigger than we are, some greater purpose, something we cannot see with our eyes or touch with our hands. We may not know what to call it, but I believe that all of us—even if subconsciously—yearn for it and aspire to encounter it.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explains that “the ordinary man is inclined to disregard all indications of the presence of the divine in life. In his conceit and vainglory he thinks of *himself* as the possessor.”⁶

But Judaism gives us a method to “save [ourselves] from such hallucination”—and that method, says Heschel, is *sacrifice*.

Sacrifice is why we’re building the *mishkan*. It’s the dominant topic of *Leviticus*, which we’ll start reading next week. What *is* it?

Says Heschel: “[The religious person] rids himself of all sense of being a possessor by giving up, for God’s sake, things that are desired or valued, and by depriving himself, for the sake of others who need his help, of those things that are precious to him.

“Sacrifice,” he explains, “is not to abandon what has been granted to us, to throw away the gifts of life. It is, on the contrary, giving back to God what we have received from [God] by employing it in [God’s] service.”⁷

The *mishkan* is the polar opposite of Achashverosh’s palace. Achashverosh gave us permission to satisfy our every physical desire and need for fleeting pleasure, but by inviting us to sacrifice, God gives us the ability to transcend our limited existence, and know the lasting joy of service, and satisfy our equally human need for *meaning* in life.

Perhaps, ironically, Judaism understands that we need the foil in order to get it. We need to celebrate Purim once a year—to let loose, to be ridiculous—in order to really understand the beauty and power of sacrifice.

To quote Heschel again: “Life is a mandate, not the enjoyment of an annuity; a task, not a game; a command, not a favor. ...

“Life...is a flow of opportunity for service, every experience giving the clue to a new duty, so that all that enters life is for [us] a means of showing renewed devotion. Piety is, thus, not an excess of enthusiasm, but implies a resolve to follow a definite course of life in pursuit of the will of God.”⁸

Wow.

But hey, we *are* only human.

So, if we’re going to live most days on such a lofty plane, we’re gonna need a little time in Achashverosh’s palace, too.

That's why my boys and I are off to Miami. I'll see you next week for Purim. Don't wait up!

1 Translation taken from R. Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Joy of Purim," In: *Days of Deliverance*, 97

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., 94

4 Ibid., 98

5 Emmanuel Levinas, "The Temptation of Temptation," In: *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 32-33

6 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, 292

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 294