

Sermon Vayikra 5784: What Will Be *Your* Esther Moment?

By Rabbi Michael Schwab
(Draft for speaking purposes only)

Compared to many, I don't cry very easily. Though, certain things do indeed bring me to tears. For example, when I hear a first person account of acts of hatred or violence towards *young people*, the tears fall freely. I remember specifically our first rally at Beth El only days after October 7th, I cried. Particularly when our young *shinshinim* spoke - the pre-army aged Israelis (17 and 18 year olds) who are currently living in our community as they teach Hebrew and lead Israel clubs in the schools in our area. They shared the trauma that they experienced that day: as with shaky hands they worriedly and frantically scrolled through images of what occurred on Oct 7th to see if their own young friends had been captured or killed, as they spoke to peers whose parents, siblings and other relatives were murdered or abducted, and as they received texts from some of their friends that after only a few months of being drafted they were now heading to the Gaza border to put their life on the line to defend their country. 17 or 18 year old kids and this is what they were going through.

And, recently I have also shed tears when listening to our *own* children, American college students, who have shared with me the fear they have of showing any sign that they are Jewish on their campuses, as they have experienced threats of violence, intimidation and discrimination from students and professors alike. No one, but especially young people, should have to endure such trauma or have to go through such experiences. They should be able to learn and be young without threats to their life, without being hated for their heritage, without being vilified simply because they are Israeli or Jewish.

We have spoken at length here at Beth El about the critical situation in Israel. And we must remain vigilant and committed to supporting our Israeli family in every way we can. But today I want to talk about the other issue of grave importance which we are facing right now as Jews and which demands our attention: the dramatic rise of antisemitism right here in the United States. Did you know that *since* October 7th there has been an increase of over 350% in antisemitic incidents - **350%! - that is unprecedented**. There have been over 4000 occurrences in the last 4-5 months. As Jonathan Greenblatt, the chief

national executive of the ADL recently wrote, “The American Jewish community is facing a threat level that’s now unprecedented in modern history. It’s *shocking* that we’ve recorded more antisemitic acts in three months than we usually would in an entire year.”

Add to that the AJC report, which shared that 78% of *American* Jews said they felt *less safe* here in the U.S. because of the Oct. 7th attack in *Israel*, and 46% said they'd actually changed their behavior as a result. More than 63% of Jewish adults described their community’s status in the U.S. as "less secure than a year ago," reflecting an increase of more than **20** percentage points from last year. And one in 5 said businesses in their community had been the target of antisemitism over the past five years. Case in point, due to the level of threats that were made publicly and on line, the Matisyahu concert at the House of Blues, right here in Chicago, was canceled by the venue - a music concert (not a rally or lecture on Israel) by an *American* Jewish artist received such virulent threats that the CPD wasn’t sure they could keep everyone safe.

Perhaps the most alarming aspect is what is happening on college campuses. About one-quarter of young Jews on college campuses said they had avoided wearing, or displaying, items identifying them as Jewish and stopped expressing views on Israel on campus or with classmates. According to Adam Lehman, President and CEO of Hillel International, over 1000 incidents of antisemitism occurred on college campuses between Oct 7 and February 7th, which is a **700% rise from previous levels**. Many of our kids are afraid of bodily harm and are so worried about their safety they do not want to let others know they are Jewish. Too many of our students, instead of *learning* at the Universities they are attending, which is the main aim of course, are just trying to get by without experiencing trauma. And instead of growing and finding themselves, as such students should at this stage, they are having to hide who they are.

These statistics and descriptions should **alarm** each and every one of us. As a community, we cannot afford to just hope that this trend will blow over at some point. We live in the world of social media and

during a time when generally accepted facts do not exist. Personal truth about the world comes from whatever source one accepts as trustworthy. Therefore, hateful tropes about Jews and false statements about Israel abound and multiply over facebook, twitter, snapchat, tik tok and all sorts of web-based blogs. “ Israel indiscriminately kills babies” and “is perpetuating a purposeful genocide”, “Jews are trying to replace American workers with immigrants”, “Jews control the economy or government for their own benefit”, “American Jews are only loyal to Israel and are not trusted citizens of this country”, etc. etc. What we thought were fringe beliefs of the past are becoming accepted again and are all over social media, which is the main way younger people get their news.

We should be extremely alarmed by this situation. But that alarm must not make us run and hide. It should not make us become despondent or panic. Instead it must do what threats against our people have always done -- spur us to action. Our most prominent Jewish institutions came together this week at the ADL offices downtown to

shine a light on antisemitism in our community and to say, enough is enough. We need to speak out against anti-Semitism and resist it in every way we can. In particular, we must get our neighbors, allies and fellow citizens to do the same. As the late and great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks once wrote, “Jews cannot fight antisemitism alone. The victim cannot cure the crime. The hated cannot cure the hate. It would be the greatest mistake for Jews to believe that they can fight it alone. The only people who can successfully combat antisemitism are those active in the cultures that harbour it.” As Jews, we cannot defeat antisemitism alone, but, alternatively, if Jews are silent about our own mistreatment we cannot expect others to rise up and raise their voices either.

Tonight we are about to begin Purim. It is a wonderful holiday that is fun, joyous and festive. We will transform this Field Family Sanctuary into a room filled with raucous laughter and loud joyous singing. I encourage you all to come for Megillah reading tonight and tomorrow morning. Yet, the Purim story features a terrible and infamous anti-semite, Haman (yes, feel free to drown him out). Tonight Jews

around the world will remind ourselves that it was not only in 2023 and 2024 that antisemites expressed their hatred towards Jews, and even tried to kill us, but also in ancient Persia. So why such a happy holiday for such a sobering story? Because it is a story of heroism, of our community standing up to hate, of rallying our allies to do what is right, and then succeeding. Through Esther, a Jew, and Achashverosh, a non-Jew, we defeated Haman's plan. We persevered and we thrived.

And we can study the turning point in the Megillah and learn from it for today. I quote, "Hathach, the messenger, went out to Mordecai . . . and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [And Mordecai bade him] to show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people.

[Esther gave] the following reply: "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman,

enters the king's presence in the inner court *without* having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. . . .

Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.”

When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, Mordecai had *this* message delivered to Esther: “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 may come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to this royal position for just such a crisis.”**

Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai: “**Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!**”

Esther was the Queen but she had hidden her Judaism. Like our college students today, she was afraid to let the king and the court know that she was a Jew. Thus, the king had no idea that the vile plot of Haman would affect the people he knew and cared about. And while he

should not have fallen prey to Haman's plan to start, and he should have known better on his own, without that knowledge he had no impetus, no awareness and no inspiration to interfere and understand the implications of Haman's vile plot. Esther was the only one who could speak out effectively and have the king actually hear the message. Understandably she was scared, but Mordechai gave her courage by saying that perhaps it was for this moment, to help the Jewish people avert this crisis, that she had become queen. And this was the inspiration she needed. She decided that she shared his faith that if she was bold, her actions would be successful and she could help deliver the people from this impending tragedy.

And she did it! She risked her life and went to the king and she revealed her heritage and asked the king to intercede. She raised awareness and sounded the alarm and her advocacy was effective. She was a great hero because she did not stay silent and she did not let her fear rule her. She did what she could, even at great personal risk, to protect her people.

What will be your Esther moment? How will we channel the power of Esther today? How, on this Purim eve, can Esther become our model and inspiration once again? For the Purim story compels us to do our part, to speak up in the face of hatred, to rally our allies and all decent people to call out and banish the antisemitism in our communities. We must, once again, resist the Hamans of the world, and create a safe society for our people and our kids. We can do this through sending emails and calling elected officials, University presidents, school district superintendents and anyone we know in a position of power to speak up and do what they can to protect Jews and to condemn anti-Semitism. Personally, I subscribe to ADL, AJC, JUF and Hillel email lists. Every day I go through them, and every day I click on any message they ask me to send, sign any petition they ask me to sign, and call any official they ask me to call. In addition, you can speak about this to your friends and neighbors. Tell them what is happening and why this is so alarming. Ask them to keep that in mind when talking to others and to join you in advocating for Jewish safety and denouncing antisemitism. Remind them that violence and intimidation against Jews,

using hurtful tropes to describe Jews, and saying that Israel has no right to exist, are wrong, hurtful and are acts of hatred against our community. And like Mordechai did for Esther, we must strengthen each other, give each other confidence, faith and support, and make sure that no Jew, especially those who have experienced antisemitism directly, ever feels alone and isolated. Perhaps, indeed, it was for this moment in history that each of us was placed here to do *our* part in protecting and supporting our people. Perhaps, each of us must conjure up the heroic Esther inside of us.

And what is more, I do not think it is insignificant that when Mordechai described the redemption of our people from Haman's decree that he used the words *Revach V'hatzlachah*, which can be translated to "abundance and fortune". Our stand against antisemitism is not only about defending, protecting, and surviving. This is about facing hardship that we experience in order to flourish, thrive and grow! This is about a belief that we can change things and make them better. This is about a Jewish attitude that with a faith in Gd, and in the power of our

own collective actions, we *can* do hard things and improve the world. Not only to *protect* our community but to make our communities thrive. Therefore, especially during these times, come to services, celebrate our holidays with gusto, participate in Jewish communal events and activities, give to Jewish institutions with more generosity, practice Jewish rituals and customs with pride and live joyous inspired Jewish lives, the way Judaism was meant to be lived.

Tragedies have befallen the Jewish people, not only today and not only in Persia, but over and over again during the course of our history. But such a history should not depress us, rather it should give us hope and inspiration. Because each time we have faced such adversity, not only have we persevered but we have found a way to thrive and make our lot better. Think of our community over the last 75 years. We have a state of Israel for the first time in almost 2000 years. So many of our communities have achieved a level of success and acceptance that has no precedent in Jewish history. We have the power, the faith, the resilience, and the will to overcome this. We have wonderful young people who

have been brought up to love their Judaism and take pride in it, like our Bat Mitzvah Emma. But, like Esther, we have to act, individually and as a community, so that we can turn our tears of sadness and frustration into tears of joy over our ability, as a community, to overcome, to survive and to thrive like we never have before. *Ken Yhi Ratzon*, may it be Gd's will. Shabbat Shalom and Happy Purim!