

your secret. And one day, your mother and father will come and get you, and bring you home again.” “And you, do you have a secret?” you asked him. He nodded. “Yes, I do, Es... I mean Eva. Yes I do.” You left me then, holding tight to the hands of your new friend. Your face was smudged with tears. But you went quietly, won over by a sucking candy and a new doll.

For many, many months, we did not hear from you. Towards the end of the war, roads and bridges had been bombed, and we were cut off from the countryside. Somehow, through many miracles, we survived, your father and I. Many, many Jews, millions of Jews, did not. Then, the war was over. The wicked Nazis were destroyed. Like all the Jews who survived we tried to put our life together again. Our one thought was to find you. We set out for the village where we had sent you. We walked ten miles by foot. The railroads were down and there were no trains. And as we walked, we prayed. We prayed that we would find you safe. We knew that many villagers had driven out the Jewish children that they had agreed to shelter. Others had handed them over to the Nazis. We also knew that there were villagers who had grown to love the children in their care and did not want to give them back to their parents. And the children themselves were often too small to remember that they had Jewish parents.

Torn between fear and hope, we made our way down the dirt road that led through the village. We decided that we would not tell you all at once that we were your parents. It might frighten you. We would make friends with you, slowly. We would win you over. Gradually, you would remember. Suddenly, we caught sight of a child, a small, sunburned girl with matted brown hair and bare feet. She was playing in the dirt in front of a house. Our hearts leaped. It was you. “Little girl,” your father called in a trembling voice, “come here.” You came over and stared at us with wide, wary blue eyes. You stood there with your thumb in your mouth. How can I describe how I felt? My heart sang with gratitude to G d because we had found you, healthy, alive. But there was no welcome, no recognition in your eyes. You had forgotten us completely. Suddenly, you turned and ran into the house. “Ma,” you called to someone inside. “There are people here, funny people. They’re outside.”

Suddenly, we caught sight of a child, a small, sunburned girl with matted brown hair and bare feet. But there was no recognition in your eyes. A small woman in a black kerchief came out. She was holding you tightly by the hand. Her face was blank, stony. She looked us up and down, our pale faces, our dusty city clothing. Suddenly, I was frightened. She was holding you so tightly, as if you belonged to her. I remembered the woman in the hospital who had said, “Give her to me.” I forgot all our plans. I forgot that we had decided to tell you slowly, gradually.

“Ester’ke,” I burst out. “Esther Malka. It’s Mommy and Tati! Don’t you remember us?” You froze. You stared at me, without moving. Suddenly, your face changed. You seemed to awaken from a dream. Recognition flared in your eyes. With a little cry, you tore your hands away from the woman who held you, and you were in our arms.

It had grown quite dark while my mother was talking. She stirred, glanced at the clock on the wall, Shabbat was over. But I wanted to prolong the moment, to make it last a little longer.” How come,” I asked, “How come I forgot everything--you and Tati and being a Jewish girl--and remembered only one little thing, my name?”

My mother rose to take out the spices, the Havdalah candle and the wine cup. “I guess,” she said, “I guess because a name, a Jewish name, is not a little thing after all.”

Dear Friend:

Purim is upon us. “When the month of Adar comes, we increase in Joy.” Purim is the apex of the Joy of this month. Joy knows no bounds. It is time to rejoice in miracles, good times, and in making the choice to be ourselves.

The Megillah describes the outcome of the Purim story with one brief phrase: “And the Jews experienced light and joy, gladness and honor.” Our Sages associate each of these terms with a mitzvah: ‘Light’ refers to Torah study, ‘joy’ to celebration of the festivals, ‘gladness’ to circumcision, and ‘honor’ to tefillin.

What is the connection of these mitzvot to the Purim miracle? All four serve as signs of the Jews’ ties to G d. Haman had decreed that these mitzvot not be observed because he could not bear the Jews’ proud display of their connection with G d. And so, with the Purim miracle and the effacement of Haman and his decrees, “the Jews experienced light and joy, gladness and honor,” i.e., they were again able to observe these mitzvos without obstruction.

Hence, we observe the Holiday of Purim each year, on the 14th of Adar, with the following Mitzvot:

a) Reading the Megillah (book of Esther), which recounts the story of the Purim miracle. b) Giving money gifts to the poor. c) Sending gifts of food to friends. d) A festive Purim Feast.

Let’s celebrate that we are here to stay. L’Chaim, to Life!

Happy Purim!

Sincerely,



Rochelle Kaplan

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Lesson 5
Purim 5776

ב"ה
Chai for Challah

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The story of the Megillah and the miracle of Purim from the hands of the evil Haman is a gripping one.

Haman doesn’t merely request the annihilation of the Jewish people, but with convincing proof, that they are a nuisance that should not be tolerated. Haman’s argument was simple: “The Jews are different, they stick to their own set of rules and refuse to conform. Good bye and good riddance to them. Megilat Esther 3:8-9: “ And Haman said to King Achashverosh, There is people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from those of every people (they don’t eat from our food, they don’t marry our women, they celebrate holidays with the excuse they cannot work, and they do not keep the king’s laws): it is therefore no use to let them be.”

Throughout history we find similar claims (The Romans and the Jews: “The Jews regard it as a crime to kill any newborn infant”. The Romans, as the Greeks before them, killed mentally and physically handicapped infants, which they considered unaesthetic and purposeless) and when confronted, Jewish leaders have debated and valiantly defended their faith in the face of their vicious opponents. Queen Esther, however, does not do the same when she encounters Haman’s arguments. Rather, using her charm to play on the king’s grace is all that seems to happen. Clearly, Esther (Megilat Esther 7:3-4) is attempting to approach the issue from two sides, personal and economical. First, Esther exposes her Jewish Identity. The queen is a member of the people condemned to death. Esther knows, that this alone will not work, so she continues to discuss logic and cash. By selling the Jews as slaves, Esther argued, Achashverosh would be profiting far more than by exterminating them. The money Haman offered him is miniscule compared to the potential profit from selling the entire nation into slavery.

The King, who never knew that Esther was Jewish, is outraged at Haman. He has him executed and the decree subverted. Pursuant to subsequent requests by Esther, Achashverosh grants the Jews the right to self-defense against anybody who would dare to harm them. The entire climate in the Persian Empire toward the Jew is radically transformed. Esther’s first cousin, the Jewish sage Mordechai, is appointed viceroy, replacing Haman.

Further analyzing the course of events, one question remains. Haman did not argue the case for Jewish extermination on the basis of senseless venomous passion. He presented a sound and persuasive case to the king. They are a bizarre people, separatist nation, who will not accept the King’s ultimate authority and consider their own laws superior. How could a leader tolerate this, a strong accusation indeed!

Yet nowhere in her entire dialogue with the king does Esther refute this argument. Why did Achashverosh annul the decree if he believed Haman’s outcry to be valid? One might argue that Esther’s charm and grace were the elusive factors to the king’s change of heart. But, Esther does not rely on this alone and presents logical arguments.

On Purim of 1969, during the space race and struggle for civil rights and social freedoms, The Rebbe, Rabbi M.M. Schneerson, used the storyline of the Megillah to explain one of the most important lessons of what it means to be a Jew in modern America. He noted the thundering silence in the face of Haman’s argument by Esther. Where is Esther’s answer?! He explained that certain questions don’t need answers. There are times when the facts on the ground dispel any doubts, when reality is exposed, debate or dialogue dissolve into nothingness, and the only thing needed is to open up one’s eyes.

Esther is one such example. As soon as she revealed to Achashverosh that she was Jewish, Haman’s arguments went up in smoke.

“Yes, we are different and will never conform, but- I am your beloved wife whom you know so well, and do I match any of the vicious libels being portrayed?!” By her sheer presence, when she identified herself as a member of the Jewish people and the Jewish faith, Haman’s thesis vanished.

The message is clear: The answer to anti-Semitism is not to run away, hide or shove our Judaism under the rug. Non-Jews disrespect self-hating Jews who do not stand up for themselves. Our Job is to stand tall and proud, and with kindness, respect, and dignity, the world will thaw to our message, like Achashverosh to Esther. Esther’s day to day life demonstrated, louder than any argument, the absurdity of Haman’s arguments that the Jewish people threatened society. Seeing Esther, sensing her refinement and inner beauty, the King understood that this alien nation who lived by another code, commanded respect. It is in fact, their otherness that elevates other

nations, to live and to love deeper, to encounter their individual path to G-d, rather than threatens them. If anything, they will prove to be the greatest blessing for the empire.

A vital lesson for our day and age is clear. Sometimes Jews think that by hiding their “otherness” we will gain approval of the world. Yet, facts prove otherwise: Assimilation, the eclipsing of the unique quality of the Jewish people, has never assuaged anti-Semitism. Tradition tells us that the Jews of Shushan, capital of the Persian Empire at the time of the Purim story were quite assimilated. The Talmud relates, that they were quite content to partake of the party Achashverosh threw. Jews in Germany were also highly assimilated and fully integrated in mainstream society, yet in that very country, the worst Jew hatred in history, sprouted. Tostoy writes: “The Jew is the religious source, spring and fountain, out of which all the rest of the people have drawn their beliefs and religions.” John Adams wrote, “The Hebrews have done more to civilize men than any other nation. When we learn how to embrace our “otherness” with love and grace and pride, rather than shame and guilt, it becomes a source of admiration and inspiration for all of humanity.

R’ Chaim of Volozhin once remarked: “If a Jew doesn’t make Kiddush to sanctify himself by maintaining a distinctly Jewish lifestyle, then the non-Jew will make Havdalah for him, by making the Jew realize he is different.

This lesson was culled from JLI Torah Studies taught throughout the year at Aleph Learning Institute of Baltimore

A Story

All She Remembered Was Her Name

By Rochel Yaffe (reprinted from Chabad.org)

It was late Shabbat afternoon, that magic moment between dusk and darkness. The visitors had gone. The baby was already sleeping. Soon the lights would go on. My father and my brother would be home from Shul. There would be a call for the Havdalah candle, wine and spices, and the workweek would begin.

But for the moment it was Shabbat--Shabbat peace, Shabbat stillness. I curled up next to my mother on the living room couch, and begged, “Tell me a story. Tell me about myself when I was little.”

And my mother began:

You were born in a very difficult time, a sad and bitter time for our family, for the Jewish people. Wicked Hitler was on the march across Europe. Like Haman before him, he had sworn to destroy us, to kill every Jewish man, woman and child who lived on the face of the earth.

Hitler’s armies had not yet reached Hungary. He had not yet arrived in our town. We had heard terrible stories, things we didn’t believe, couldn’t believe. But I was young, not much more than a girl, and I had just been blessed with my first baby. Forgetting all our troubles, I waited eagerly for the nurse to bring my baby to me. I sat in the large hospital bed, and watched the nurses bring the other women their babies.

“Oh, give her to me!” I cried. “Please, let me hold her!” But the nurse, a heavy-set woman with small, hard eyes, did not smile.

Finally, a nurse came walking toward my bed, holding a small bundle wrapped in a flannel blanket. What a beautiful baby you were:

Your eyes were big and blue in your small rosy face. Someone had tied a matching blue ribbon into your fuzz of brown hair.

“Oh, give her to me!” I cried. “Please, let me hold her!” But the nurse, a heavy-set woman with small, hard eyes, did not smile.

“Take her,” she said shortly, dumping you roughly at the end of the bed. “I don’t know why we have to bother with these Jewish brats.” I must have gasped, because she looked straight at me and repeated. “These Jewish brats. They are a waste of time and money. Hitler will take care of all of you before the year is out.”

I couldn’t answer her. I just held you tight in my arms and cried and cried.

“There, honey, don’t let that old witch upset you.” It was the woman in the bed next to mine. She was a rosy-cheeked farmer’s wife with graying hair. “Come on, let’s have a look at your baby. Oh my, oh my; isn’t she cute. What a pity...”

Suddenly, she sat straight up in her bed, and spoke to me with great earnestness, “Listen to me, listen to me, Mrs.”

“Mrs. Rosenberg,” I supplied.

“Listen, Mrs. Rosenberg. Let me have her.” Her heavy face was flushed with excitement. “Let me take her. Why should she die, the innocent babe? I swear to you, I will care for her as if she was my own. I never had children, you know. Give her to me.”

“Listen to me, Mrs. Rosenberg,” her face was flushed with excitement. “Let me take her. Why should she die, the innocent babe? I will care for her as if she was my own...”I stared at her in amazement. “What do you mean? What are you saying? How can I give her to you? She is ours. She is a Jewish child and we will raise her, G d willing, as a Jewish child.”

“You won’t raise her.” The friendliness was gone from her face. “That poor babe, she hasn’t got a chance. There won’t be any Jewish kids left when Hitler gets here.”

“Don’t be so sure,” I answered uncertainly. “Don’t be so sure. This is not the first time they have tried to destroy us.” And suddenly I remembered. I remembered that it was Purim that day.

Purim was your birthday. It was a sign, I thought, a sign from Heaven, that my baby was born on the very day that Haman met his downfall. It was the day that was transformed from darkness to a great light. I was suddenly filled with courage and confidence. “In every generation they have risen up against us to destroy us, and G d has always saved us from their hands. And He will again. He will again!” My neighbor continued to reason with me, but I was no longer listening. I was thinking about my baby’s name.

Your father came to visit me that afternoon. How good it was to see him, hi smegillah tucked under one arm, a bag of kosher food in his hand! My first words to him were, “Avrom, I know what our baby’s name will be. She will be Esther, Esther Malka.”Your father nodded. “Esther. Esther Malka. A beautiful name, a good name.” Gently he stroked your little head. “G d will surely help.”

And that is how you got your name. To us your parents, to our relatives, to all the people who knew you, your name held a special meaning. It meant hope. It meant faith. “Ah, Esther’ke. Esther Malka,” people would say, smiling down at you. “A beautiful name, a good name.” And then they would sigh, “G d will help. G d must help.”

Indeed, we needed G d’s help desperately in those days. Hitler’s armies entered Hungary. By the time you were two years old, we

were forced to leave our homes, and we were living in the ghetto. What is a ghetto? It was a kind of prison. There was a section of the city that was surrounded by walls and guarded by Nazi soldiers. Young men like your father were marched out at the point of a gun to work for the Nazis. Otherwise no Jew was allowed to leave the ghetto walls. And inside those walls we lived, crowded together, many families in one apartment. We lived with cold, hunger and fear. Many became sick and died. Others were taken away by the Nazis and never heard from again. That is how you lived and grew in the ghetto. You were a pale, thin little girl with wide, anxious blue eyes. There were so many things you could not understand.

And then it was Purim, your third birthday. Your father and I were determined that this one day you would have a taste of Purim joy, that you would laugh, have some fun. We planned it all carefully. That morning before your father left with the workers, I sewed a pair of gold earrings inside his jacket. He would trade these with the farmers for flour, sugar, and dried fruit. We would have hamantashen. After he had left, I found a torn lace curtain. It became your gown. From cardboard and old wrapping paper, I fashioned a crown. Your costume was ready. When the men returned from work, people gathered in our house to hear your father read the megillah. How little it takes to make a child happy! You wore your costume like a queen. I had let your hair loose and brushed it until it shone. Your eyes sparkled under your crown. Your cheeks were flushed with excitement. In your happiness, you were the center of attention. People smiled, and cried. They were remembering other Purims in better times. Every time your father read the name Esther HaMal-kah (“Esther the Queen”) the other children smiled at you. You stood very proud, very serious. The megillah was your story. That night, as I tucked you into bed, rosy and happy, stuffed with hamantashen, you murmured sleepily, “I’m lucky I am Esther.”

But that was the last happy day I can remember in the ghetto. Things got worse and worse. Every few days now, German soldiers rounded up terrified Jews and forced them into cattle cars. They never returned. Finally, the day came when we realized that we had to send you away. The plan was to smuggle you out of the ghetto, and send you far away to the countryside, to one of the little villages so poor and small that it was forgotten, even by the Germans. There you would live with a peasant family until the war was over. For a sum of money, the last we had, they might agree to take in a Jewish child, and ask no questions. When you woke up that morning, I had all your clothing packed in a large satchel. The young man who was going to take you was already waiting, sitting patiently in the corner. As I dressed you hastily, I tried to explain. I told you that the young man was a friend. He would take you to a place where there were no soldiers and no guns, where you could eat all the potatoes and bread you wanted.

You asked, “Are you and Tati coming with me?” I told you we were not. Then I gripped you by the shoulders and spoke to you very sternly. “Remember one thing. You are not called Esther anymore. Your name is Eva. Say it again. Eva. No matter who asks you and when they ask you. Nobody must know you are a Jewish child. Do you understand?” You were only three years old, and you didn’t understand. You burst into loud sobs. “You won’t come with me. Tati won’t come with me. And I can’t even have my name.”

I tried to think of words that would comfort you. But none came to me. Besides, I was afraid that if I spoke, I would be crying along with you. Then I heard the young man speak. “Come here, Ester’ke.” His voice was calm and friendly. “Come, I want to tell you a secret.” You stopped crying, and regarded him curiously. Tall and blond, dressed in the rough clothing of a peasant, he looked like a gentle. But he spoke to you in Yiddish, and his eyes were Jewish eyes, kind and sad. “You’re not leaving your Tati, your Mommy, or your name. Not really. You will keep them all with you, here.” And he pointed at your heart. “And at night, when you are alone, in bed, you will say the Shema and you will think of them, your mother, your father and your Jewish name. But you won’t tell anyone. It will be

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