**An Important Legacy**

By Jodi Fried

Last night an unwelcome visitor entered my dreams - Yahya Sinwar himself, let his name be blotted out. As he stared at me, his eyes held the fiery look of death. I glared back, trying to keep them from piercing my soul. I don’t remember what he said, if he said anything at all, or if I responded at all, but I awoke shaken, and grateful it was a dream.

It felt real.

It felt real because it is real.

It felt real because we, the Jewish nation, are battling this beast outwardly and inwardly on a daily basis, both in communal and very personal ways. Even though, B”H, I have not and pray that I will not ever come face to face with such a disgusting, horrid, abominable man, and even though I, along with my immediate and extended family, am ‘safe,’ ‘fine,’ and ‘comfortable’ in the diaspora, we as a Jewish people are not safe.

We have been here before. Many times.

And while in good times we let the lessons of history recede, in trying times, we turn toward them. One of these historical lessons we can turn to is the Purim story. Embedded in the Megillah are lessons we can draw on for strength today.

Megillat Esther hints at what diaspora life would be like for Jews thousands of years later. At the time, as Haman points out to King Achashverosh, “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people…” (Esther, 3:8).[[1]](#footnote-1) Jews were scattered throughout the Persian empire, which covered a vast area from India to Ethiopia with Shushan its center. Thus, Purim was the quintessential Jewish diaspora story.

Not only were the Jews scattered, but they were also integrated into society. Mordechai, for example, remarkably knew 70 languages. He learned these languages not so that he could daven to HaShem in each of them, though maybe he did, but rather so that he would be able to communicate with others, with those different from him. We find ourselves in that position today, straddling the customs and values of the societies in which we live with those of our precious heritage. The fact that Queen Esther was able with relative ease to slip into royalty, disguise herself, and act like ‘the other’ suggests that she too straddled both worlds. She knew enough to slip in and was strong enough in her values and faith to stay true to herself and HaShem in an unimaginable circumstance.

The story continues when Esther, in need of strength as she anticipates her pivotal meeting with the King – a meeting in which she will expose her true self and advocate for her people – instructs Mordechai to “Go, assemble all the Jews to be found in Shushan…” (Megillat Esther, 4:16).[[2]](#footnote-2) She knew it was necessary to bring the Jews together. Together, the Jews would fast. Together, the Jews would pray. Together, the Jews would strengthen their resolve, their spirituality, their love for one another. Their prayer would be Esther’s protection.

With that love, *together* they would prevail.

And they did.

The key to survival was the unity of the Jewish people, their love for one another.

Rabbi Eliyahu Kito, writes about the Purim story, “If unity were to again become the hallmark of the Jewish people, then Haman would be unable to subjugate even those who had stumbled. If he had attacked one, all Israel would have felt the pain.”

In Megillat Esther Mordechai and Esther show us that unity makes us stronger, that unity is essential to our survival, that unity leads to miracles. And so, it is time that we make unity our credo. It is time for us to unify.

This sounds daunting, if not impossible. We Jews live all over the world, part of many melting pots, and we often hold competing world views. We also don’t take the time to go beyond our circles to get to know one another.

However, this is not where our story must end. Even if unity, in its truest sense feels unattainable, there is still much we can do to love other Jews, to show we care, to foster unity amongst our people. We can:

1. **Smile.** Shammai teaches us in Pirkei Avos (1:15) “…Receive all men with “sever panim yafos,”” with a kindly countenance.[[3]](#footnote-3) We learn to receive others cheerfully, with a smile. Our sages teach that if we give another an extravagant, beautiful gift with a sour face, it’s as if we gave him nothing. However, if we simply smile at our fellow Jew, even without a gift, it is as if we have given the “finest gift in the world.”[[4]](#footnote-4) A smile will lift another’s spirits, make them feel like they matter, help them feel a part of your world.

On a personal level, when I spend Shabbat away from home, what stands out time after time is how few people look me in the eye, let alone smile in passing. It’s time for a change.

What’s more, smiling helps us release cortisol and boosts our endorphins that in turn boosts our mood, lowers blood pressure, relieves stress, and more! Life is busy. A smile is a tiny gesture of acknowledgement that can truly make a difference in someone else’s life and your own.

1. **Come Together.**  Thirty-three hundred years ago we stood as one to receive the Torah. Years laterBen Gurion said “It is important that we unite and spread unity to the world through our example and teaching, so that everyone will know that their good future depends solely on unity. We will then all witness in practice what it means to be a “light unto the nations.””

We tasted the power of unity just months ago at therally for Israel in Washington DC.

We can do our part to come together on a smaller scale. For example, attend a local rally, an event through a local Jewish Federation, or even online.

Make a personal effort to have a conversation with someone you don’t often speak with, be it a parent at your child’s school, someone you see at Shul, or a neighbor. Go beyond to say ‘hello’ and invite them for coffee. Chances are they will be grateful for the outreach and possibility of a new friend.

1. **Break down stereotypes.** We are commanded in Vayikra 19:18 “Veahavta Lereiacha Kamocha...” - Love your fellow Jew as you love yourself. This verse is classic. We hear and cite it all the time. But how often do we internalize its meaning? To love our fellow Jews, we must break through the boxes in which we put ourselves and others. We must burst our bubbles. We must think about others in a different light, setting aside our stereotypes and the energy we use to perpetuate them. Instead, we must take this verse to heart.

So, try to catch yourself when you think negatively of another person. Repeat the phrase VeAhavta Lereacha Kamocha – love others as yourself. Internalize it and trust the process.

1. **Believe in HaShem’s miracles.** Our prayers and HaShem’s miracles have saved us before and will save us again. Each Chag commemorates a different miracle – often a big one with many smaller miracles nestled, even hidden, within. We need to look for the small miracles in our lives every day and continue to believe in and recount the big ones. In so doing we continue to build ourselves up, give strength to one another, and celebrate our oneness as a Jewish people.

Together let us celebrate our little wins, our small victories over insulation and separation. Let us bask in our togetherness and follow in Mordechai and Esther’s legacy by doing our part to bring our People together.

Am Yisroel Chai!

1. Translation from sefaria.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Translation from Artscroll [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Translation from The Hirsch Pirkei Avos [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Avot D’Rabbi Nattan 14:1, sefaria.org [↑](#footnote-ref-4)