

March 2018 Message from Rabbi Dubin

Dear Friends,

As some of you know, I came frighteningly close to losing my father during the waning months of 2017. Last summer, he began suffering unexplained weight loss and started to become increasingly frail. None of his doctors were able to explain it, so we simply attributed it to his being 84 years old. By Rosh Hashanah, his walking had become labored, and his fine motor skills were growing weaker by the day. And then, just after Rosh Hashanah, he took a fall that landed him in the hospital. He was released a couple weeks later for home rehabilitative services, but that did not help. Not only did his physical condition continue to deteriorate, his cognitive abilities began to slip as well. Unable to hold a coherent conversation with him, I was rapidly losing the father I knew. Before long, he was back in the hospital. Within days he had fallen into a pretty constant mental fog. Over the next two months, as he remained in the hospital, his doctors were at a loss to explain his condition. Many theories were put forth, but no definitive answers could be ascertained. The only positive spin was that he seemed generally happy. We began preparing for the worst.

But then, when we had already lost almost all hope, the doctors decided as a last-ditch effort to give him a very high-powered antibiotic that is used sometimes to treat Lyme Disease. They were not optimistic it would help, but neither did they imagine it would hurt. Within a few days, my father was feeding himself with his own hands once again. His mind almost immediately became sharper and his body stronger. Less than two weeks later he was taking his first steps once again in rehab. (Today, two months later, he is walking over a mile at a stretch. His sudden and overwhelming recovery has been nothing short of a miracle.)

Within days of beginning his antibiotics, my father began to recapture interest in things he had always enjoyed, which included wanting to keep abreast of the news. He had questions, of course, but was eager to become current once again.

One day, while he was still rehabbing in the hospital, he turned to me and asked the most unexpected question: "Tell me, what's with all this sex stuff in the news?" After a moment's thought, his jarring question all made sense to me. Looking back at the calendar, I realized he had fallen into his fog just days before Harvey Weinstein hit the front page. He had missed the explosion of the *#metoo* Movement. In a nutshell, he had slept through three of the most challenging and volatile months our nation had experienced in years, or perhaps even decades.

With the heart-wrenching scourge of gun violence (rightfully) retaking the front page after the massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, it's reasonable to imagine that *#metoo* might be sidelined. We cannot allow that to happen. Fortunately, I don't think it will. It may take longer than anyone wants, but since *#metoo* has become so powerful precisely because it has justice on its side, and since justice cannot be denied, I don't see how anyone will possibly be able to stand in its way over the long run. Purim, the holiday we just finished celebrating, is one of my favorite

holidays. It's fun, it exhibits the overwhelming capacity that we human beings have to shape destiny, and it's a holiday that enables us to imagine our lives in new and creative ways. At the same time, Megilat Esther is bookended by episodes that we should all find challenging, to say the least. The story begins with a wife being punished for refusing to parade herself before her husband's guests, and it closes with the indiscriminant killing of tens of thousands of people.

The ending, it could be argued (if one is so inclined), represents exaggerated numbers that are presented as amusing parody, but the beginning is more difficult to explain away. In addition, those who choose to discount the ending can point quite easily to the fact that the miracle of Purim would have been just as powerful had the scroll ended before this final wave of vengeful violence took place. The killing, after all, is superfluous to the miracle itself.

I suppose the same superfluity could be argued for the beginning, when Vashti is banished for disobeying her husband. That is, I suppose the story could have begun instead with a grand announcement that the king of the land was looking for a wife. The same miracle facilitated by Esther still would have taken place had Vashti not been involved at the beginning. But there is a difference between the story's bookends, and we would do best not to ignore it.

While the ending, as horrific as it is, seems somewhat detached from reality, the beginning is all too familiar. It is no stretch for us to think of women who pay an unfair price just for standing up to abusive men in their lives. And that, the realism that this introduction represents, is to me even more horrific than the farcical ending. The fact that it is so easy for us to picture the scene of punishment demands from us that we must listen and give credence to the cries of *#metoo*.

In some ways I envy my father for having missed the first few months of the Harvey Weinstein horror show. Who of us can say we enjoyed even a moment of it? On the other hand, I am also grateful that Weinstein's story, disgusting as it is, has come to light. His is a story that we cannot afford to hide any longer. His may be an extreme version of what *#metoo* stands against, but the essence of the story, the basic perversion of the manner in which Weinstein has used his position of power to extort others to bow to his every selfish whim over the years, is understood intimately by millions of Americans, and billions of others around the world. We hate hearing the details, but it is the details that give urgency to the need for change and justice.

I cringe each and every year when I am forced to relive yet again the abusive treatment suffered by Vashti simply for having had the courage to protect her own dignity. At the same time, I am grateful for the reminder. We, as a society, have so much left to accomplish if we will ever stand a chance at calming – as opposed to suffocating – the cries of *#metoo*. Yes, progress takes time, but unless we are confronted with the ugliness of reality on a regular basis, I don't see how a better tomorrow can ever be established.

There is enormous value to enjoyment and laughter. Purim is a time for fun and frivolity, and I would never want to take that away. But embedded in the excited amusement are a number of deeper meanings. Some of them are pleasant, such as our admiration for Esther and Mordechai for devising a way to save the Jewish people from annihilation, but others are terrifyingly heart wrenching, such as our disgust over how Ahasuerus treats his first wife. Both ends of the emotional spectrum are necessary for full human existence. So let us have fun where we can, but let us never grow deaf to the cries of those who need to be heard.

Chag Purim Sameach,
Rabbi Dubin

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