



A Hamantaschen By Any Other Name: Purim and the Healing Power of Laughter

By David Nelson

Someone recently forwarded me a strident e-mail denouncing the use of the word "hamantaschen." The author argued that it was inappropriate to call such a delectable treat by the name of our ancient archenemy. His name should be blotted out, not honored by association with a much beloved Purim pastry!

The e-mail raised several interesting issues for me. The first comes from the subject line, which appeared on my computer as follows: "h----tasch." This curious notation leads me to believe that some find the memory of Haman so horrifying that his name ought not to be mentioned. (For fans of the Harry Potter books, this is reminiscent of the practice among the students at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry never to mention the name of the evil dark wizard Voldemort, but to refer to him euphemistically as "The-one-who-must-not-be-named." It is a significant indication of Harry's own rebellious spirit that he refuses to use such circumlocutions, referring regularly to Voldemort by name.)

In no other Jewish context can I think of a personal name that we cannot pronounce out of fear or loathing. Instead, it is only God's name that we avoid, reflecting a sense that speaking a name makes it normal and profane. Indeed, to refuse to use Haman's name gives it a sort of holiness that we must certainly avoid!

But now let us consider the content of the "h----tasch" message. It does no honor to Haman or his name to name our hamantaschen after him. In fact, by doing so we achieve a sort of silly, measure-for-measure revenge: We eat the very villain who sought, unsuccessfully, to "devour" us! Note that this sort of revenge, and the power it reflects, are rooted in the fact that laughing at a threat is one way to overcome it. Both in situations where physical retaliation is not an option and in those in which it is, humor directed against the enemy gives us a bit of courage by arming us with a layer of moral invulnerability.

This leads me to question: Is there any threat so vile and terrifying that we cannot laugh it down? I think most Jews would place Hitler (whose name, incidentally, we do use, though some follow it with the Hebrew phrase "yimach shmo-may his name be erased") in the category of topics that are beyond the pale of humor. This is ironic, since the use of humor by Jews inside the concentration camps has been documented. They, whose lives were being destroyed, could joke, but many of us, whose lives were not threatened, feel it is wrong. Is our reverence for, and grief over, the lives lost and the unbearable pain suffered in the

Holocaust leading us inadvertently to "sanctify" the memory of the most evil of all destroyers?

Ought we, as part of the long slow road to healing, experiment with the protective balm of humor that has served us so well in other instances?

