

Washington Is Our Shushan, Purim Is Our Day

By Brad Hirschfield

About seven months ago, I began receiving phone calls from the volunteers and professionals who were putting together the United Jewish Communities' "Washington 12" Young Leadership Conference held this week in Washington, D.C. I was to be a keynote speaker and a consultant to Washington 12. The calls all went something like this: "Hello, Brad? We may have an issue." At that moment I felt like mission control when the Apollo 13 astronauts issued those famous words, "Houston, we have a problem." The Washington 12 conference, scheduled for March 19-21, "conflicted" with Purim. And for a second I wasn't sure how to respond. I mean, let's face it, this was not exactly one of the circumstances that came up in yeshivah.

But then, I knew exactly how to respond. We have a "problem"? Purim "conflicts" with the conference? Let me get this straight, I said to them. Purim is a holiday that tells the story of highly successful, apparently secular Jews living in the capital of their empire during a time when Jews had attained unprecedented levels of influence and affluence. They use both in approaching the king and princes of their land to try to create a better, safer, more humane world.

The holiday celebrating this event happens to fall out when 4,000 highly successful Jews, many of whom the demographers and other custodians of Jewish culture would label "secular," would gather together in the capital of their empire in order to approach the king and princes of their land to try and create a better, safer and more humane world.

We have a "problem"?

Instead of a problem, we had been handed the opportunity of a lifetime. The Washington 12 conference became an opportunity to actually live out what our ancestors could only read about. Their fantasies became our realities. For 2,500 years, Jews have gathered around the world to tell the Purim story. And it's a beautiful story. Mordechai is an influential Jew who spends most of his time hanging out at the court of the King, Ahashverosh. In fact, it is his position in the court that allows him to foil the plot of two other court officials to assassinate the king. King Ahashverosh is a simple-minded guy who enjoys a good party and living the good life in the Persian capital of Shushan. Unfortunately, he tends to listen to bad advice, the worst of it coming from his chief minister, Haman. Haman, of course, is the bad guy in the story and his deepest desire is to rid the world of the Jews. While Haman is busy unfolding his plot, Mordechai encourages his niece, Esther, to enter a contest to become the queen. She does, she wins, she intervenes on behalf of the Jewish people. We all live happily ever after.

It's a great story not only because we live happily ever after. It's a great story because Purim promises that we actually can change the world. It promises that we can be real players in a global community. It promises that we can make a difference as Jews-for ourselves, our people, and for humanity. The Purim story teaches that political action is sacred action. It teaches that a strong spiritual identity propels you outward into the world, and does not become an excuse for retreating from it. It teaches that each and every one of us can be the heroes of the story.

Now I thank God that we have kept on telling the story of such promises. But let's face it, they were promises that we really couldn't keep. Until now. As a people, we were masters of davening our dream of a more perfect world, but only now, more than any time in the last 2,500 years, can we move from davening our dream to delivering the dream. We now have the power and the freedom to ask: "What do we want the world to look like?" And we have the capacity to plan the strategies and make the moves to get it there.

Like our Persian ancestors, we are very fortunate. Washington is our Shushan. Like Mordechai back then, we actually are seated at the gate of the king. In truth, we are within the gates. We have moved from being petitioners to being partners. We are actually positioned to speak out for what we believe, and to have it heard by all of the right people. The king and princes of this land have welcomed us into their courts, and when we speak, they listen. In fact, we are them and they are us.

The real question we must ask ourselves is: When you have that kind of power and influence, how do you use it? How do you build institutions and relationships that help secure human dignity wherever and whenever it is threatened?

Of course, if Washington is our Shushan, then we can be the Mordechais and Esthers of the story. So we must ask, are we really up to being Mordechai and Esther?

Who was Mordechai? Mordechai might well have been counted as an assimilated Jew by the "experts" of his day. After all, how else could he endanger his life by becoming enmeshed more actively in the politics of the empire than in those of the Jewish community? How else could he turn to Esther as the source of salvation rather than running to the synagogue and offering a prayer to God? How else could he encourage his niece to enter a contest whose grand prize was to marry a non-Jew?

But if we could just imagine, as Mordechai must have, that Jewishness is so expansive, and the global stage upon which we are blessed to play it out is so wide, then we might then move from our obsessive fears of assimilation toward a Jewish model of integration. This is a model in which all of who we are gets to enter whatever we mean by Jewish, and then everything that we mean by Jewish

will shape who we are. The only thing that stands in our way is fear. The fear that either we are too small, or that Jewishness is. Of course, neither is true. Let's be like Mordechai.

Who was Mordechai? Mordechai was a fearless Jew. I do not mean that he was unafraid to ignore Haman's demand that he bow down. Of course there was that. I mean the fearlessness that allows one to play out their personal identity in the larger world in which they live, the fearlessness that propels one to become a participant in the politics of the day without shying away from publicly proclaiming the deep spiritual roots of that participation. The fearlessness to sit in the court of the king, and proudly make a difference because he appreciated the potential of the power and influence that he had. When we share that appreciation of the potential of Jewish action in the larger world, and act on it, we are Mordechai.

And who was Esther? Esther was a woman who entered the Persian version of "Who Wants To Marry A Multimillionaire," and won! Esther was a woman whose lifestyle was so Persian that Mordechai could advise her not to tell Ahashverosh or his courtiers that she was Jewish. Of course, that implies that she must not have performed any of the practices that would have singled her out as a Jew-passing on the shrimp, say, or taking a few minutes to say her morning prayers. In short, Esther, even more than Mordechai, would have been a poster-girl for discontinuity and marginal Jewish identity. Yet she emerges as the heroine of the story.

Who was Esther? Esther was a strong, smart, sexy Jewish woman. Esther loved life and loved the Jewish people. And like all great loves, hers propelled her to take risks. She understood that one uses one's strengths and resources, not only to preserve the past or to protect the status quo, but to build the future. Esther was bigger than the false dichotomies between commitment to the past and commitment to the future, between religious and secular, between insider and outsider, which so often divide us. When we rise above those false dichotomies in order to build the community, when we take risks for those who are vulnerable, we are Esther.

At Washington 12, we did read the Purim story from the Megillah, but we did even more. We experienced the story of Purim. We danced between the past, the present and the future as we celebrated one of those remarkable moments in human history when stories of the past become resources in the present for building a more meaningful future. We celebrated our ability to turn our parents' dreams into the realities of our lives. We celebrated the capacity of each and every one of us to be a Mordechai or an Esther.