

Entering Adar 5781
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Adar, the month with Purim at its center, begins today. The traditional expression for this Rosh Hodesh is, "whoever enters Adar, grows in happiness." Just like that.

Stirrings of spring usually come sometime near Purim, which may help explain why we say all month long, "**Be Happy, It's Adar!**" But the stated reason is, upon examination, rather thin: the clearly fictionalized anniversary of a possible one-time deliverance, for the Jews in one ancient kingdom. We affirm that in the long run, happiness will indeed prevail. But this year, even more than usual, "joy and merriment" is only part of the equation.

Often overlooked, when addressing the dramatic and well-crafted Book of Esther, is the high body count. The megillah claims that huge antisemitic mobs, rampaging with explicit permission from the narcissistic ruler who later changed his mind, were mowed down -- 75,800 of them! -- by the Jews who had hastily been allowed to defend themselves. Realistic?! More like a revenge fantasy. But the story makes up a major part of this month's mixed moral legacy.

Hundreds of years later, in the Roman era, there's more Adar ugliness to confront. The Jerusalem Talmud (Shabbat 1:4) records that one Adar 9, the students of Shammai brought weapons into the rabbinic 'senate,' the study-house, and used them against students of Hillel – blood was shed, and numerous people died that day. Rabbi Daniel Roth of Pardes, who runs the 9Adar.org project to dedicate this aching anniversary to constructive conflict, now describes this as "literally the January 6th of the Jewish calendar."

And then there's Covid, that most Haman-like of viruses, that exploded on these shores around Purim 2020. One year ago, Westchester County and NYC synagogues began shutting down a few days into Adar; communities like ours warily held their last open community events around Purim, then shuttered their facilities. We've not been back since we last grabbed groggers or hefted hamantaschen -- and nearly half a million have died of it, on these shores alone, since last Adar. Yes, our 'happy month' now marks a full year of global pending, a first yartzheit for the mask-free life we once knew.

(Masks: The word *masekhot*, now ubiquitous for in cloth and surgical and N95 varieties, was long part of "Chag Purim." As the traditional song tells us, Purim is celebrated with *masekhot*, *ra'ashanim*, *zmirot*, *v'rikudim* – masks, noise-makers, songs and dances. Once we're finally post-pandemic, future Purims still won't be the same, especially where masks are concerned.)

So Adar's legacy is a sober one. It touches on external hate, internal division, mass murder, mass suffering, and mass death. And still, for all that: "**Be Happy, It's Adar!**"

We should be proud to be part of a people that affirms hope and even happiness through its harrowing history. As with many dark Adars and Purims past, we're hardly dressing up in costume, running around the synagogue, and eating too many baked goods this year (well, we can still do that last one 😊). We're short on naive or superficial happiness, for sure. But this Rosh Hodesh Adar invites us to cultivate a deeper happiness, the kind that comes from facing down the challenges of the world, and prevailing. Happiness like:

- The “victory” of Jacob, after wrestling and being injured, emerging with the new name and identity, Israel.
- The “happiness” of Reb Nachman of Bratzlav, who suffered from life-long depression while leading an oppressed minority, and nonetheless taught: “the great command is to always be happy” -- *Mitzvah Gedolah Lih'yot b'Simcha Tamid!*
- The joy – all that we can possibly muster this year, despite the deaths and dislocations we've daily dealt with since last Purim – of our arriving again at Adar, and entering it as fully as we can. (It helps to have a youth-led Purim Shpiel to look forward to; circle 7pm on Thursday 2/25, now!)

"It's hard to make predictions, especially about the future" (Yogi Berra, if not King Solomon). But where Purim 5780 saw the start of a steep decline, the trend line at Purim 5781 looks more favorable. Vaccinations are now underway, and powerful social reckoning is happening at the same time. Though things may get worse before getting better, our hope for happiness ahead is well-founded.

Values like Tikvah (hope) and Emunah (faith) have gotten our people through any number of Haman-times and Covid-times over the centuries. The Jews afterward, including in ancient Persia, would usually then know a time of *orah v'simcha v'sasson vee'kar* -- **light, joy, celebration**, and **honor** or "**dear-ness**" (Esther 8:16). It's coming, soon, here too! That's our hope this Adar, just as we append to that verse and chant each Saturday night at havdalah:

Ken tih'yeh lanu. So may it be for us.