



THE GREAT GATSBY AND PURIM

Just by chance (if anything can be considered “chance” in the Purim season), my American Literature class happens to read *The Great Gatsby* around Purim time each year, and the connections between the two stories are hard to ignore. Both are set in wine-splashed palaces of excess, and both are ultimately searing indictments of the hedonistic cultures they describe. In these cultures, after all, the main characters feel they must parade around in masks — Gatsby, a self-made man from a poor family, feels he must masquerade as “old money” to fit in; Esther is a furtive Jewess who cannot reveal her faith in her role as Persian queen. And in these cultures, too, the parties feature



endless streams of nameless, faceless, guests whose private identities don’t matter as long as their eyes confer conspicuity on their hosts’ consumption. Achashverosh “gave a banquet for all the officials and

courtiers — the administration of Persia and Media, the nobles and the governors of the provinces in his service, as he *displayed* the wealth of his kingdom” (Esther 1:3-4). At Gatsby’s parties, “People were not invited — they went there... sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party...” (Fitzgerald 45).

Most terribly, in these hedonistic cultures, this namelessness and facelessness can end in the horror of murder. Achashverosh is all too willing to get rid of his wife and replace her via lottery — any woman can potentially fill the role — and he is equally willing to sentence his most trusted advisor to death upon one

accusation; he'll get another one. And, of course, he carelessly throws his ring to Haman to do as he pleases with a whole nation of faceless people. Who is in the courtyard to advise tonight? It doesn't matter. Send whoever it is in! In *The Great Gatsby*, the same is true. The wealthy and arrogant Tom Buchanan leaves his mistress dead on the road when he realizes he might be implicated in the crime, and when Gatsby is murdered at the end, none of his wealthy new "friends" even bother to attend the funeral. To these immorally wealthy characters, people — even friends and loved ones — are only means to an end, and can be disposed of the moment they become inconvenient.

Both the author of the Megillah and F. Scott Fitzgerald, then, do not shy away from blaming the materialistic rich for their own problems and the problems of the world. And yet, in *Gatsby*, there is something interesting. The wealthy are not the only ones to blame. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's unassuming narrator from the Midwest, finds himself Gatsby's neighbor one summer. Even as Nick claims to loathe Gatsby, "who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 4), he can't help but become transfixed by him. Nick thinks that "there was something gorgeous about him" (ibid.), and spends much of his summer observing and wondering about Gatsby. The wealthy in the novel are guilty of terrible indulgence, to be sure, but by themselves, are only a corrupt few. It is their less wealthy admirers who create a culture out of them. The wealthy are guilty of consumption, yes, but it is the less wealthy — the foreigners visiting from more modest places — who make that consumption conspicuous by laying their eyes upon

it with wonder. After all, without Nick, would Gatsby's story have even been told at all?

Interestingly, the Talmud seems to imply that the Jewish people were not unlike Nick Carraway in this sense. They, too, were foreigners from a more modest and understated environment. And, though the story of Purim is usually conceptualized as a typical tale of anti-Semitism, the Talmud in *Megillah* 12a strangely places some of the blame on the Jews themselves:

שאלו תלמידיו את רשב"י מפני מה נתחייבו
שונאיהן של ישראל שבאותו הדור כליה
אמר להם אמרו אתם אמרו לו מפני שנהנו
מסעודתו של אותו רשע.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's students asked him, "For what reason were the Jews of that generation (i.e., the generation in which the Purim story took place) deserving of destruction?" He answered, "You tell me the answer." They replied, "Because they participated in the banquet of the evil (Achashverosh)."

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Does such a sin, merely "participating in the banquet of Achashverosh," merit complete and total destruction? What could this passage from the Talmud mean? Perhaps it is similar to what Fitzgerald implies about Nick. Achashverosh's repugnant lifestyle by itself was one thing. But it was the participation of so many of his subjects — especially the ones who were supposed to be more innocent and more devout — that transformed his personal lifestyle into a culture. Similarly, Achashverosh's desire to show off his wealth was bad enough on its own. But conspicuous consumers like he and Haman, just like Gatsby, needed the admiring eyes of others like fires need oxygen to burn. Achashverosh needed everyone to see Vashti — it wasn't enough that he was married to her. Haman needed others to look up at him and say, "This is what shall be done for a person whom the king admires" (Esther 6:9). The Jewish people, by participating in the "banquet of evil," were Nick's eyes on Gatsby — making consumption conspicuous and gluttony admirable. In their fascination and participation in his banquet, the Jewish people unwittingly lent Achashverosh power, the same power that he ironically, but not surprisingly, almost used to destroy them.

Which is why it makes so much sense that Esther and Mordechai are the saviors of the Purim story. Esther — whose very name means hiddenness — is quite literally dipped in the oils and excess of the kingdom for twelve months, but remains unchanged. Esther's defining feature, when she is finally called for her night with the king, is "*lo biksha davar*" (Esther 2:15), she did not ask for a thing. And yet, despite never asking, never looking to be looked at, she is,

R. Eliezer Ashkenazi on Achashverosh Flaunting His Wealth

והתועלת הנמשך מן הכתוב הזה לענין הסיפור שכל אשר נתן בלבו להתגאות ולהתכבד ולהראות גדולתו והיותו ראוי למלכות ההוא כן הכבוד ברח ממנו ונתבזה שאשתו מרדה בו עד שלסבה זאת נתיירא שמא יתבזה בעיני מלכים ושרים וימרדו בו.

The role of this verse in the story is to tell us that the more [Achashverosh] tried to elevate and honor himself, and show off his greatness and his royal worthiness, honor evaded him and he was disgraced. His wife rebelled against him to the extent that he had to worry that he would be disgraced by the princes and officers and they would rebel against him [if he didn't punish her].

Yosef Lekach 1:4

ironically “noseyt chayn be’eyney kol roehah” (Esther *ibid.*)— pleasing to all who look at her, particularly Achashverosh. Perhaps someone unadorned, to him, was the most exotic of all: Esther — who at first is too shy, too humble to come before the king. Esther — who does not make her big request on the first occasion, but only the second. Esther — who has no parents, no legacy to speak of — the orphaned queen. Esther — whose name hints to the true Savior of the day, The One Who is never seen at all.

And Mordechai, who takes Haman’s fantasy and turns it on its head. Haman wanted to ride through the streets and have everyone look at him and shout his glory. The energy would all be flowing in his direction. Mordechai, in a twist of fate that

could only happen in a kingdom where individuals don’t matter and facelessness reigns supreme, ends up being the one to ride into the streets of Shushan, victorious, and in the king’s garb, but no one shouts anything before him. Instead, “*veha’ir Shushan tzahala vesameacha; layehudim haytah orah v’simcha vi’sasson v’yikar*” (Esther 8:15-16) — the Jewish people rejoice. The energy of his moment flows outward, to the people — Mordechai’s celebration is only significant as an emblem of their own. And this is how the Megillah ends: “*ki Mordechai hayehudi ... doresh tov l’amo vi’dover shalom lechol zaro*” (Esther 10:3). Mordechai always sought out the good of his people and spoke peace to everyone. His leadership was not about himself, but about others.

Rabbi Pini Dunner explains that this same redirection of energy — outward instead of inward — is the reason behind the mitzvot of Purim day. At the end of the Megillah, the Jews are victorious, and suddenly have money and power. Rabbi Dunner explains that they are faced with a choice: they could “revel and party, or turn their success into an opportunity to share, to become God’s partners in His material world by thanking God through using that material world.” They choose the latter — to give *mishloach manot* and *matanot l’evyonim*. “Ahasuerus’s parties and fondness for self-serving materialism are offset by the Jewish reaction: turning material success into a vehicle for spirituality and Godliness,” Rabbi Dunner writes. The Jewish people redeem themselves at the end of the story. They transform from a people who were fanning the flames of consumption to a charitable nation who give their own wealth to others.

And with this redirection, we head into Pesach — that holiday of modest beginnings, of basics, of flattened egos and flattened bread. Purim, of course, is also “*shloshim yom kodem lachag*”— thirty days before Pesach, when we are supposed to start learning its laws. And Purim leaves us in just the right mindset to do so, as it re-teaches the life-threatening dangers of materialism, while at the same time providing the role models and tools to reorient away from it. Purim leaves us right off where we need to be in order to perceive The One Whose face was hidden in the Megillah, but Who emerges into such broad daylight in *yetziat mitzrayim* that even a “*shifcha al hayam*,” a maidservant on the seas, couldn’t misperceive it (Rashi, Exodus 15:2). Stripped bare of cloaking drapery and regal garb, of excess and distraction, the curtains of the Yam Suf can part so that the essential becomes visible, and we can say “*zeh Keili vi’anvehu*” (Exodus 15: 2) — this is my God, and I will enshrine Him.

Works Cited

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