



Table Talk: Quotes and Questions for Family Discussions

Prepared by Shoshana Rockoff (GPATS) and
Netanel Muskat (RIETS)

Please enjoy this collection of sources, quotes, and discussion questions to enhance your Purim experience.

Humor and Joy as an Antidote to Fear and Hate

Imagine what it is to be part of a people that had once heard the command issued against them: “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews — young and old, women and children — on a single day” (Esther 3:13) ... The very existence of Purim in our historical memory is traumatic. The Jewish response to trauma is counter-intuitive and extraordinary. You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends. While the story is being told, you make an unruly noise as if not only to blot out the memory of Amalek, but to make a joke out of the whole episode. You wear masks. You drink a little too much. You make a Purim spiel. Precisely because the threat was so serious, you refuse to be serious — and in that refusal you are doing something very serious indeed. You are denying your

enemies a victory. You are declaring that you will not be intimidated. As the date of the scheduled destruction approaches, you surround yourself with the single most effective antidote to fear: joy in life itself. As the three-sentence summary of Jewish history puts it: “They tried to destroy us. We survived. Let’s eat.” Humour is the Jewish way of defeating hate. What you can laugh at, you cannot be held captive by.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Purim Family Edition, rabbisacks.org, <https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/purim-family-edition/>

- **Reflect on a time that you have used humor to alleviate fear?**
- **Why do you think humor is the Jewish way of defeating hate?**

Re-acceptance of the Torah

The Rabbis record the tradition that although the Jewish people accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai out of their own free will, there was, nevertheless, an aspect of coercion involved. After the miracle of Purim, the people accepted the Torah again, this time without any element of coercion (*Shabbat* 88a) ... The custom of wearing masks and dressing up to conceal one’s true identity is meant to show that just as in the story of Purim, one had to look below the surface to see the hidden Mover behind the events, so too in Torah study, one must always look below the surface, and read in-between the lines to absorb the insights of the Oral Torah. The custom of masquerading is meant to teach us, *al tistakel*

bekankan elah bemah sheyesh bo, “Do not look at the outer appearance of the container, but rather at that which is hiding beneath the surface within it.” This is also why God’s name never appears in the megillah. The hidden Oral Torah interpretation always enlightens the Written Torah and puts things into clearer perspective.

R. Hershel Schachter, The Spirit of Purim, torahweb.org, https://torahweb.org/torah/2001/moadim/rsch_purim.html

- **How can Purim become a re-acceptance of the Torah for you?**
- **How can you look below the surface level to find the hidden meaning in events and relationships?**

Stepping into History

The Jews of Shushan didn't sit around waiting for a miracle. They gathered their forces, united in support of Esther, and when they did so, their fate took a turn. Mordechai and Esther are the heroes of the Megillah, not because they split the sea, made it rain or caused the sun to stand still in the heavens. They are the heroes of the Megillah because they stepped into history when their people needed them and put the needs of their nation before their own. It is precisely their lack of prophetic vision that makes them our heroes from the Megillah's perspective. They didn't act because God commanded them to, they acted because they

understood that when God's face is hidden, we don't have the luxury of remaining apathetic to the needs of our people. G-d's absence from the Megillah reminds us that when His face is hidden, our hopes for survival lie in our ability to set aside our differences and rally around our shared interests.

Yael Leibowitz, *Supernatural Elements*, mizrachi.org, March 2020, <http://mizrachi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/HaMizrachi-Purim-5780.pdf>

- **How can you step into history?**
- **What is one small thing you can do to contribute to the good of your nation?**

God's Hiddenness

[Lots] seem to symbolize everything traditional Judaism doesn't believe in. Why? Well, lots are chance. In casting lots to determine that day upon which the Jews would die, Haman was doing something rich with symbolic meaning: he was intentionally leaving the date of the Jews' demise up to chance. The Megillah even goes as far as to say that Haman cast lots not just to destroy us but also to terrify us (Esther 9:24); that is, the lots were instruments of psychological warfare. It was as if Haman was taunting the Jews with the thought that whether they would live or die was not up to a providential God, but up to blind fate. They were the prisoners of cold, hard chance. Such a vision is indeed terrifying. If Jews and Judaism have stood for something over the

years it is for the opposite vision. In our worldview the Almighty May prefer to stay hidden much of the time, but that doesn't mean He's not around — it just means you have to find Him. God is present in the workings of history. He's just behind the scenes. The historical events of Purim seem, themselves, to suggest this theological message.

Rabbi David Fohrman, *The Queen you Thought you Knew*, (USA: OU Press, 2011), p.10

- **What is one way that you have seen God's hand in your own life?**
- **Even though not explicit, in what ways do we see God's workings in Jewish history?**

Human Fragility

While God's name never appears explicitly, God's presence is stamped on virtually every word in the Megilla. Through a series of unfortunate events, fate ensures that no character is absolved of the kind of life reversal that reminds us as readers of the fragility of the human condition. The tensile vulnerability suggests a world in constant flux, where one's ascent represents another's descent and vice versa. It is a world that can be naught but a fragile place.

Dr. Erica Brown, *Esther: Power, Fate, and Fragility in Exile* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020), p.22

- **How does the absence of God's name in the Megilla enhance the reader's understanding of the fragility of the human condition?**
- **Have you ever had a life reversal or experience that made you more aware of the fragility of the human condition?**

Renewal of the Covenant

On Purim we celebrate not only the annulment of Haman's decree, but also the renewal of the covenant, as Chazal interpret: "*Kiyemu ve-kibelu*" (Esther 9:27) — they affirmed what they had already received" (*Shabbat* 88a). For this reason, Esther emerges as the heroine of the story, rather than Mordekhai. Mordekhai was a Jerusalemite. He encountered no dilemma; for him, the covenant was never in question. Esther, however, had no father or mother. She experienced the internal struggle and confrontation of Diaspora Jewry. Megillat Esther is the story of this dilemma, whether to identify with Am Yisrael, or to accept the vanities of the local population. "They re-accepted [the Torah] during the times of Achashverosh" (ibid.). They reaffirmed the Torah's relevance to all times, to all places, under all

conditions. The renewal of the covenant commemorated on Purim came on the heels of the exile, of this encounter — specifically, from the questioning of the covenant that resulted from this encounter.

R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, Purim, Holiday of Covenant and Salvation, etzion.org, 21.09.2014, <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/purim/purim-holiday-covenant-and-salvation>

- **How do you think R. Lichtenstein's understanding of the Purim story has relevance to the world we live in today?**
- **Have you ever needed to "reaccept the Torah" by making a difficult decision about your own Torah observance?**



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