



I Am Not Your Pawn

Using Jews as a wedge to break apart the world order is not new.

We must be honest about what's happening here.

PURIM 5785

In just a few days, Jews around the world will gather to celebrate Purim and read from Megillat Esther, a narrative disguised as a cartoonish parody. This is the story of an indulgent, narcissistic king, Ahashverosh, a man with unlimited power and unlimited wealth. He is rash and reckless, and heavily reliant on advisors driven by their own selfish and sinister motives.

Under the king's leadership, one advisor—Haman—has been granted unearned power and privilege in the king's court. This is a man with, as one scholar writes, “a bottomless need to punish those who [m he perceives have punished him] by not showing appropriate obsequiousness.”

One day, Mordecai the Jew fails to approach Haman as deferentially as Haman demands. And Haman, slighted by a Jew, determines that he must take revenge on all the Jews, because that is how racism works (Esther 3:6). The result is catastrophic.

The text is funny, sardonic, sarcastic, suspenseful. It is literarily rich and entertaining, to be sure. But listen to Rambam, in *Hilkhot Megillah v' Hanukkah* 2:18:

It is a positive commandment to read the Megillah, even for those generally exempt from positive time-bound mitzvot. Hearing the megillah takes precedence over literally every other mitzvah: “Nothing takes priority over the reading except for the burial of a corpse that has no one else to attend to it.” And if you're the one who has to do that burial—bury, and then read the megillah.

Why? Because the themes of and questions raised by Megillat Esther are eternal:

1. To read of the vulnerability of the Jews of Shushan, we must ask: what is the fate of the Jew in the diaspora? *What are the perils of Jewish powerlessness?*
2. And, reading the revenge fantasy of chapter 9, when the Jews kill 75,811 people, we are faced with another critical, timeless question: *what are the dangers inherent in Jewish power?*

The Megillah holds other timeless wisdom, too. It teaches that life is capriciousness, unstable. Catastrophe is always possible. Everything can turn upside down in an instant. And redemption is always possible. You have no idea how your story might end.

This short book, read to jeers and groggs and interspersed— at IKAR— with funny video spiel, is deceptively simple.

Among the profound truths I have found in the lines of this text is one drawn from a turning point moment in our narrative, when Haman approaches the King offering an obscene amount of money for the right to annihilate all the Jews of the kingdom:

“There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them.” (Esther 3:8)

You may recall, for the right to engage in this murderous rampage through the kingdom, Haman is willing to pay 10,000 talents of silver, the rough equivalent of \$226 million today. The Rabbis suggest that this payment was more than just an incentive for the king to agree to his indecent proposal. Haman recognized that dead Jews cannot pay taxes— so this genocide would cost the treasury dearly. His payment is compensatory, away of making the king whole.

This makes the king’s response all the more astonishing: Keep your money, the king says. You have not only my permission... you have my blessing. (Megillat Esther 3:10-11)

This is shocking: why would the king— who has shown, so far in our story, no ill will toward the Jews— be so eager to see them destroyed that he’d forgo such a generous payment? We are left to wonder: *is this king stupid or is he evil?*

The Rabbis explain (Megillah 14a) through the story of two neighbors. One has a giant mound of dirt just taking up space in his backyard. He’d love to get rid of it. The other has a huge ditch in *his* yard, which he would love to fill.

One day, the one with the ditch turns to his neighbor and asks: would you sell me some of your dirt, so I can fill my hole? And the owner, *anxious to rid himself of the excess dirt on his property*, replies: *halavai!* Are you serious? I’ll give it to you for free!

So too, King Ahasuerus must also have harbored the fantasy of the Jews’ disappearance. The midrash (Esther Rabbah 7:20) indicates that King Ahashverosh hated the Jews even more than Haman the wicked. And so, the moment Haman offered to do the dirty work—literally to take the dirt off the king’s hands—the King’s subterranean fantasy emerged to the light of day. That’s why he accepted no money from Haman. The two were doing one another a favor.

For years now, I have sat with this conclusion: *One man’s hatred for Mordecai and the Jews alone was not sufficient to create the conditions for annihilation. It was only when Haman’s hatred met up with the subtler hatred in the heart of the king that the Jews’ lives were truly in danger.*

Here the Megillah-- masquerading as a parody, a spoof, a story of feasts and fantasy-- reveals an important, perhaps counter-intuitive truth about the way antisemitism manifests in the world.

It is a fool's errand to try to parse out the graver danger, as if it's one brand of antisemitism vs another. It is the flourishing of antisemitism that poses the real danger.

This text transformed my thinking, awakening me to the absurdity, the futility, the danger of a discourse that simultaneously denies the prevalence of antisemitism from the left, while decrying it from the right, a default position for so many in our movements for justice. The failure, in this camp, *to hold our own to account* is not only personally painful, but undermining of all claims to a just and liberatory future.

And yes— this text points to the danger of an entire industry of anti-antisemitism organizations and professionals who vociferously defend antisemites on the right, while excoriating anyone who speaks out for the rights of Palestinians as a dangerous Jew hater.

This is clear to me: the threat is not antisemitism from the left or the right. It is the fact of the ubiquitousness of antisemitism, its normalization from multiple quarters at once that endangers us all.

Alas, another year, another series of Congressional hearings, ostensibly trying to hold universities to account for an increasingly violent and extreme antisemitism.

Don't I applaud these efforts? The fact that there are finally grown ups in the room, a Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism determined to hold to account the institutions that have so utterly failed to protect our Jewish kids... *my Jewish kid?*

For 17 months universities have fallen into a moral quagmire of their own making, failing to offer clear guidelines and protocols that would honor the right to protest and free speech, while keeping all students safe. For 17 months, my kid and her Jewish friends, and I, by extension, have been gaslit by well intentioned people whose world view seems to be dependent on minimizing or denying the reality of antisemitism in the university, because it clashes with their rigid world view, and hierarchy of suffering. As if multiple things cannot at once be true.

I have heard from friends, colleagues, parents who are heartened that finally, finally someone is saying that it's not right for Jewish students to be threatened and marginalized, kicked out of clubs. Finally! Someone objecting to classes being disrupted, dorms fliered with jackboots stomping on Jewish stars and images of machine guns with the words: *The Enemy Will Be Eliminated*. Finally someone willing to offer unequivocal condemnation for students met on their way out of shabbat dinner with "Go back to Poland!"

But NO... I am not heartened. Our saviors have not arrived. Ted Cruz is not our Queen Esther. And these efforts have not made the Jews safer. These efforts, including denying my alma mater— the epicenter of some of the dumbest and most shocking displays of overt antisemitism— \$400 million dollars, including threatening to deport students who engage in

protest, these measures do not emerge from a genuine desire to keep our kids– or anyone– safer.

These efforts are driven by political operatives who claim that they're committed to ensuring that institutions that receive federal funding comply with federal anti-discrimination laws. This is a lie. Their interest is clearly not in protecting anyone from discrimination– these are the same bad actors who are defunding the Office for Civil Rights, and pressuring the EEOC to drop cases against corporations who are discriminating against trans and non-binary employers.

Similarly, their interest is not in fighting antisemitism. How do I know this? Because these same characters fawn over the wealthiest and most powerful man alive, defending his support of the neo-Nazi party in Germany, and his repeated use of the Nazi salute. (Every child knows the difference between a Heil Hitler and an “awkward gesture.” Sadly, some of the luminaries and self-appointed leaders of the Jewish community seem to have conveniently forgotten.) These same warriors against antisemitism continue to platform and amplify antisemitic far-right influencers. They perpetuate Nazi era imagery of the Jewish billionaire puppeteer controlling the purse strings of government– relying on precisely the same images and conspiracy theories, of some of the student protesters they now threaten with deportation.

These hearings, the defunding, the threats of militarized campuses and rewritten curricula– these are extreme acts that may feel comforting to the Jewish community– finally someone is listening. But please hear me: *these actions themselves constitute a form of antisemitism.*

What may feel, today, like a welcomed embrace is actually putting us at even greater danger. *We, the Jews, are being used to advance a political agenda that will cause grave harm to the social fabric, and to the institutions that are best suited to protect Jews and all minorities.*

We are being used. Our pain, our trauma, is being exploited to eviscerate the dream of a multiracial democracy, while advancing the goal of a white Christian nation.

And this tactic– Jews as a scapegoat to divide our society and weaken democratic institutions– is not new. This is a playbook that has been used by authoritarians of the far right and the far left throughout history, those whose interest is in sowing division, justifying repressive policies, and distracting the population from the truly nefarious and rapacious agenda it is advancing at warped speed.

I turn again to Hannah Arendt, who warns of precisely this in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*:

Antisemitism, she writes, was the ideological weapon for the destruction of the old order; it served to absolve the new movements of all responsibility for [the upheaval they were engendering]. Totalitarian leaders used antisemitism to shift blame away from their own destructive policies, ultimately framing Jews as the cause of the pain the people were experiencing as a result of their repressive [actions].

Ultimately, Arendt concludes, it was the Jews who *were held responsible for the destruction of all national structures.*

In a time in which the old world order is being remade before our eyes, we would do well to take seriously this warning: Jews– paradoxically blamed for both the protests and the repressive response to them, for both globalism and nationalism, capitalism and communism– are the perfect, convenient wedge for those seeking to dissolve and destroy our democracy.

Here's just one, small proof-text for you: Recently, the right-wing think tank responsible for Project 2025, released a National Strategy for Combatting Antisemitism. This policy brief was written not by Jews, but by Christian Zionists. As my friends, [Rabbi Amichai Lau Lavie & Julie Dorf](#) describe it, it is: *a grotesque abuse, instrumentalizing the fight against genuine antisemitism among people of goodwill, to bring down... all dissent and liberal civil society in the United States. It is an affront to Jews, and it is dangerous for America.* The plan is called, unfathomably: "Project Esther."

This is not only an offensive appropriation of our sacred tradition. It is a pernicious deception. We must not be fooled.

Listen: the Megillah seems to have a happy ending. After near annihilation, the Jews are saved. They witness the transformation

מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֲבֵל לְיוֹם טוֹב

from devastation to elation, from grief to festivity. They make a feast, and send sweet gifts to one another and take care of the poor. They have survived! (Esther 9:22)

But you wouldn't be wrong to feel unsettled as the story closes and we roll back up this sacred scroll. The whole thrust of the narrative is that life is capricious and uncertain, that the whole world turns upside down, again and again. One must imagine the plotting of revenge for the revenge taken by the Jews in chapter 9. The story never ends here.

Political upheaval, the Megillah seems to be warning us, is a condition of diaspora. The relative calm of the past decades for Jews in America has been the exception. The rule is turmoil. Our survival depends on us learning how to navigate it.

I keep imagining that we are traversing a stormy sea in a rickety boat. With every wave, we are being thrown to the right and to the left. I feel a call– from deep within my soul– to drop an anchor, to fight to withstand this storm without losing my heart, or my mind. To do so, you and I will need to defy the norms and the storms by anchoring in community. Anchoring in our values. Anchoring in our courage, and drawing up our resiliency. Like Queen Esther did... not the appropriated Esther of the upside down world of White Christian nationalism. But in the spirit of the real Esther, the beautiful, courageous Persian Jewish queen of our ancient, sacred story.