

Purim Sermon - Ilana Mulcahy

I'm sure you know that Purim is a holiday of celebration. We are supposed to–required to–increase our happiness, which we do by sharing gifts with each other (mishloach manot), eating delicious foods like hamantaschen, and dressing up in costumes. But have you considered the connection between Purim and another holiday: Yom Kippur? An article from the My Jewish Learning site titled “The Surprising Connection between Purim and Yom Kippur” points out the similarities between these two holidays. At first, Yom Kippur and Purim seem like polar opposites, but as the article points out, “the ancient rabbis say they are really two sides of the same coin.” I will never think of Purim the same way again!

There are several reasons why these holidays are linked. First of all, the names are similar. We have Purim: named for the lots that were drawn to determine the date for the annihilation of the Jewish people in the Persian empire, spanning over 127 provinces from India to Nubia, according to Megilat Esther Chapter 1. The fate of the Jewish people was decided at random by a lottery system. On Yom Kippur, known in our liturgy as Yom HakiPurim, our lot in life is determined. We hope and pray that God will take this decision seriously, with God's great compassion and fair judgment. Put simply, we hope that God will be the one to determine our fate—that it will be in God's hands, and that it will not be a random result or consequence of the universe. However, the traditional Torah reading for Yom Kippur is Parashat Acharei Mot in Leviticus. This parasha describes a ritual to be performed by Aaron after the death of his sons. Aaron is instructed to place lots on two goats to determine their fate. By an act of randomness, one goat will be chosen to be sacrificed as a sin offering, and the other will serve as the scapegoat, designated for Azazel, removal. This goat will represent atonement, cast into the wilderness alive, set free to live its life. This demonstrates the fragility of our mortality, as our fate could be determined at random, as though by the flip of a coin. While we understand on Yom Kippur that some will live and some will die, we hope that our fate is determined with careful consideration.

There are a few more connections between Yom Kippur and Purim. One is that both holidays are mandated in the Tanach as “forever holidays,” to be observed for all time. In fact, according to the My Jewish Learning article, these are the only two holidays that would

be observed in a messianic era, should we reach one. We would have no need to commemorate mournful holidays like Tisha B'av, as there would be no more tragedies. We would even have no need for Shabbat, because we would rest on all days. However, Yom Kippur and Purim are the only two holidays that are explicitly determined in the Tanach to be observed by the Jews every year.

Another connection is that Yom Kippur represents a return to our commitment to serve God through observing God's mitzvot, commandments. We atone for our sins and vow not to repeat our mistakes, thus affirming and renewing our covenant with God. In the book of Esther, the Jews make a commitment to celebrate the holiday of Purim, and they commit their children and their children's children to this as well. This vow could be seen as an affirmation of their responsibility to the covenant, as they willingly take on this obligation.

Finally, I find a connection between Esther's leadership and bravery to stand before the king on behalf of the Jews in her community and that of the shaliach tzibbur, the person designated to serve the congregation as the prayer leader, for the High Holidays. I know from my experience as your prayer leader on the past High Holidays that the Hin'ni prayer expresses a sense of inadequacy, of self-doubt, of fear and anxiety, as the prayer leader trembles before God, referred to as king, or sovereign, and hopes that they do a good enough job representing the Jewish community they were chosen to represent. Similarly, Esther must have been trembling as she fasted for three days before mustering up the courage to approach the king on behalf of her Jewish community. She put her life in grave danger, as the punishment for visiting the king without an invitation was to be put to death. She was at the king's mercy, as he had the choice to extend his gold rod to her to indicate that she may approach, and not be killed. Luckily, he held out his staff and was glad to see her, but she must have been praying that he would show her compassion, just as we pray on Yom Kippur that God will show us compassion, when God could just as easily choose the other fate for us.

I'd like to close with a modern musical midrash on this theme, imagining Esther's feeling of unworthiness as she steps up to the task. This piece is called "Mi Yodea," reflecting on Esther chapter 4 verse 14: *"Mi yodea im l'eit kazot higa'at lamalchut?"* "Who knows if at this time next year, you will retain your royal position?" Mordechai advises Esther that the time to approach the king on behalf of the Jews is now, even though the date set for the Jews

to be killed was months later, as King Achashveirosh has a reputation for being rather fickle—think back to how easily he did away with Queen Vashti. Mordechai insists that, despite her fears, and her sense of inadequacy, the time to act is now.