

There's a reason we get drunk and wear costumes on Purim

.... it's less uncomfortable than confronting who we are, and who we still need to become.

Daniel Gordis March 14, 2022



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I don't know anyone who's very much in the mood for Purim. It's freezing here in Jerusalem (literally, just a hair above freezing at night), when it had already seemed that

spring was here. The news this morning reported that this is the coldest third-week of March we've had here in 100 years.

A few weeks ago we were hiking in T-shirts when we went south to see the anemones in bloom ...



Photo by Daniel Gordis

It was frigid on Shabbat morning, too; a sleety ice-cold rain made the prospect of venturing outside exceedingly unappealing. It could easily have turned into one of those Shabbat mornings when you just decide not to brave it. But it was Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat before Purim. For some of us, that meant that there was simply no choice.

Jewish tradition has it that we're required to hear, word for word, the reading of the extra Torah passage for that morning. It's [the passage from Deuteronomy](#) that

commands us to obliterate the memory of Amalek, the tribe that in Jewish tradition has come to represent pure evil.

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.

Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

What's being asked of us, of course, is utterly impossible. How are we supposed to blot out the memory of Amalek *and* at the same time not forget what they did? Do we seek to destroy the memory of past horrors, or preserve it?

That's hardly a new challenge. Think of the Hebrew words that many people say after they say Hitler's name: *yimach shemo ve-zikhro*—may his name and memory be erased. A fitting sentiment, to be sure; but why, then, do we spend so much time and money *preserving* his name and his memory?

That's the tension that Purim is all about. The groggers for blotting out Haman's name are cute—but they're totally ineffective. Why? First of all, we first have to hear his name before drowning it out. But even more, because we're so intent on blotting out his name, what's the word that the kids are most focused on? Haman. So much for erasing him.

What's the purpose of memory? What do we do when memory obliges us to do things we may prefer not to do? What about when memory reminds us that we are not who we need to be? To that, too, Purim has the answer. It's easiest to put on a costume, to pretend to be someone else. It's easier to have another drink or two, and for a few blessed moments, to forget who we are.

Purim isn't just a childish, entertaining story from the past; it's about how our memory of the past is meant to haunt our present.

In weeks like these, when it feels like the world could soon spin off its axis, the perennial truths of Purim are particularly sobering. Haman, of course, was said to be descended from Amalek. So Amalek was not destroyed. Naked evil still exists in the world; we still live under the threat of leadership armed with enormous power unencumbered by the slightest hint of conscience.

Or Esther's comment to the King in Chapter Seven: **"For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen, I would have kept silent"**—I don't know how many of the millions of fleeing Ukrainians know much about the book of Esther, but I imagine that their sentiments are not that different from hers. Naked evil, unrestrained, almost invariably leads to mass death.

And then, of course, there is [Mordecai's famous rebuke](#) of Esther, who does not want to risk everything to go to the King. **"If you keep silent in this crisis ... you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."**

It almost seems that Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the former actor and comedian and now Ukraine's President, heard Mordecai himself. It's hard to recall, at least in recent memory, another example of someone rising in such a stunning way to an existential challenge with such courage, nobility and character.

At least there's him.

The same, sadly, cannot be said about Ayelet Shaked, who has sought in this moment of crisis to do everything to block Ukrainians from coming to Israel. She proposed admitting some 5,000 non-Jews total (Jews are eligible for citizenship, so they are a different issue). It was a grotesquely low number. She changed her tune in the last day or two when her hand was forced by the courts, but don't be fooled. As [Haaretz correctly put it](#) this morning, "After she tried deceit and besmirched Israel's name in the world, Shaked found a way to climb down from the tree."

פרשנות | אחרי שניסתה לתחמן והוציאה לישראל שם רע בעולם, שקד מצאה דרך לרדת מהעץ

שרת הפנים מיהרה להיתלות בחבל ההצלה שסיפק הייעוץ המשפטי, השכילה להיכנע ללחץ של שר החוץ - וחזרה בה מהמתווה הקמצני שהגביל את כניסת הפליטים האוקראינים לישראל. עם קצת שכל ישר ושיעורי בית, בכל זה לא היה צורך

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שקד בנתב"ג, אתמול. הצורך שלה "לשמור על הזהות היהודית" נועד להכשיר כל נבלה וטריפה צילום: מוטי מילרוד

The policy may shift a bit, but the damage is largely done. This country, founded by people who were desperate because there was no where to go, who had no one to take them in, is (essentially) shutting its borders? Why? We're not exactly Poland or Germany, to which hundreds of thousands of people can stream by bus, by car or even on foot. You need to get on a plane to get here. How many people are we talking about?

Haaretz is (rightly) worried about how we look to the world. But I'm more worried about how we appear to today's young Israelis. This is who we are? This is how we remember? Here was a moment to inspire them with what a Jewish state is capable of doing, of being. But what we did doesn't qualify as a swing and a miss. We didn't even swing.

Who could blame those young people for having a drink (or vape) or two? Or more ominously, for wondering what the whole point is.

Shaked, who is exceedingly bright and analytic, points to Israel's very legitimate need to maintain a resounding Jewish demographic majority, so that Israel never has to choose between being a democracy and being a Jewish state. Yet one can hardly call Avigdor Lieberman, whose origins were in Russia, a bleeding heart liberal. Still, he saw things much more clearly than Shaked:

"When the cannons are heard, we must accept all those fleeing whose lives are in danger. When the firing stops we need to stop accepting refugees, but at the moment there is mortal danger, people are coming from all sorts of places where battles are being waged... There is no danger they will settle here in order to find a job," he said. "We need to allow in those who come."

Israel's Chief Rabbinate is also hardly known for its unchecked liberal instincts. But here, too, Rabbi David Lau, was fairly clear. He said that Israel should welcome those refugees "that don't find another country" at least "until they can return to their homes." And then, with the sort of Jewish memory one has a right to expect, "so there won't be a situation in which a person flees the hostility and has nowhere to go, no safe harbor."

He acknowledged that granting them residency or even citizenship "is something else entirely... but first of all, open the door."

"First of all, open the door." You can't put it more clearly than that.

How is it, I find myself wondering, that in 1976, it took Israel one week to organize an operation in which 100 commandos were flown 4,000 miles to successfully rescue hostages in Entebbe? How is it that Israel managed to launch the Covid vaccination project here, before the rest of the world, with military-like efficiency, but can't get its act together even for those it does want to admit now?

I spoke on Shabbat to a friend who's very high up in a major relief organization. Even with Jews, for whom there are no quotas, Israel is making a mess of things. In one place where refugees were amassing, he told me, Israel is able to process about 150 applications a day. But that's a fraction of those who are arriving; people are being told to "come back another day."

They won't. We'll come back to that.

First, though, an irony about Ayelet Shaked's legitimate concern about Israel's Jewish demographic majority. How many non-Jewish Ukrainians would really want to come here? It's hard to know, but this is hardly the Amalfi Coast. Are we talking 10,000? Perhaps 20,000? All the way up to 50,000?

Remember that Shaked is one of those people who is in favor of annexing Area C of the West Bank. We're not going to get into the question of whether that is a good idea or a bad one (and there are also other options). All we need to point to is that annexing Area C would mean incorporating many thousands of Palestinians into Israel. What about the demographic majority when we're talking about when it comes to *that*?

How many such Palestinians are there? The estimates vary wildly. The [United Nations says](#) that there are about 300,000 Palestinians in Area C. *Bimkom*, an Israeli organization, [estimates](#) 240,000. Shaked herself [estimates](#) 100,000, a number which she undoubtedly knows is absurdly low, but which is still far higher than the number of non-Jewish Ukrainians (who are not at war with Israel as are the Palestinians, by the way) who would arrive in Israel.

"But," one might say, "that's different. That's about Israel territorial integrity."

I get that, and in this column, I'm not taking a stance on annexing Area C. I'll just remind us all what my friend—standing with us in the drenching ice-cold rain on Shabbat

morning—told me about the 150 people a day that Israel is managing to process, and the many that it's not.

"They're being told to come back a different day," he said. "But where are they supposed to wait in the meantime? They're not Zionists. If they were Zionists, they'd have come long ago. So they're just going to go somewhere else."

Those are Jews who might have bolstered the very demographic majority that Shaked rightly wants to protect.

There are Jews out there, and they are in trouble. One hundred and fifty files a day is the best we can do? There are relatives of Jews out there, and they are desperate. They fled without papers, with no proof of their lineage. Figuring things out eventually will eventually matter. But on the border? With the canon's firing?

There are non-Jews out there, too. On the surface, they have no connection to us. But then again, not that long ago, we weren't anyone's problem either, and that's why we built this place. We're going to forget all that? On the week of Purim?

Rabbi Lau said it all: "First, open the door."

If you don't go to the King, Mordecai warned Esther, "relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter." This time, we are the ones who are supposed to be that "another quarter." This time, we are the ones who are not supposed to look away. This time, we are the ones who are supposed to remember.

There's evil out there, the Torah reminded us on Shabbat morning. What it should mean to be Israel is to remember that, and to do the right thing.