

# JEWISH TELEGRAPHIC AGENCY

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## Projecting the Purim story onto this war is appealing. It's also a dangerous mistake.

Esther wasn't certain she was taking the right action, so why are so many of us

[Claire E. Sufrin](#) March 3, 2026



Two girls dressed in Purim costumes walking in an underground parking lot being used as a bomb shelter in Tel Aviv, March 2, 2026. (Miriam Alster/Flash90)

Around me, I see many Jews using [the timing in the Jewish calendar to understand the current U.S.-Israel war against Iran in biblical terms](#). We are Esther, we are Mordecai, we have defeated Haman, they seem to be saying. We have fulfilled the commandment of blotting out Amalek, our ancient and perpetual enemy.

It's not hard to see what they are saying. On the Jewish calendar, this past Shabbat was Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of remembrance, celebrated each year on the Shabbat right before Purim. The occasion is marked with a reading from the Torah commanding us to remember how Amalekites, the followers of Amalek, attacked the Israelites on their journey from Egypt to the land of Canaan and that they did so unfairly, picking off the weakest members of the group, those straggling to keep up. The Israelites are then commanded: "When the Eternal your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!" (Deut. 25:17-19)

From this foundation, Amalek has become an archetype of a certain sort of antisemite, one who is infinitely dangerous, who is always lurking in the shadows, waiting for an opportunity to pounce. In the biblical book of Esther, our source text for Purim, Haman, who seeks to destroy the Jews of Persia, is identified as a descendant of Agag, who was once a king of the Amalekhites. That we celebrate Haman's overthrowing by Mordecai and Esther — and the Jews' subsequent rampage against their enemies at the book's conclusion — reinforces the remember/blot out dynamic of Deuteronomy and ties it tightly to Purim. Shabbat Zachor ensures we don't miss this point.

And so it seems remarkable, pregnant with meaning, that this Shabbat Zachor was also the first day of a new bombing campaign undertaken by the United States and Israel against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is modern-day Persia. Furthermore, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who was killed in the first hours of the campaign, was a hater of the Jewish people and an unfair fighter, sponsoring terrorism that killed the innocent and the weak.

And yet drawing parallels with the Purim story right now is, I believe, a dangerous move that misses essential truths about Purim.

First, the Book of Esther is not a military guide or a guide to defeating one's enemies. It is a self-contained story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. At the moment that Esther is worrying whether she has the strength to stand up for her people, we already know the end of the story, we know that she will succeed. But Esther herself does not — just think about her request that all the Jews of Persia fast with her in anticipation of the risk she will undertake. We would do well to remember that Haman, too, does not know the end of the story and ends up being hanged on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai. The more certain one is of one's plans, the more likely it seems one is to fail. This is a book that teaches us lessons of humility and uncertainty.

Second, the customs of the holiday turn us topsy-turvy, encouraging us to dress in costumes so that we are no longer entirely ourselves, and to consume enough alcohol that we no longer remember who the good guy of the story was and who the bad guy was. These practices suggest that the lesson of the holiday is one of uncertainty, of how easily things can fall apart. Shabbat Zachor, with its push and pull of remember and blot out, only underscores this point: You will never blot out because you will always remember but still you will never remember and will always seek to blot out.

Finally, I think that believing we are living through a time of epic or biblical significance risks becoming license to do whatever we want, to act as though God is working through us, as the rabbis later insisted God was working through Esther. That is the sort of midrashic move

one can only make centuries later, not only when the end is known of Esther's story is known, but when the persistence of Amalek has made a fantasy of blotting out Amalek all the more necessary.

I am not mourning the death of Khamenei or any of his henchman. But neither do I celebrate it. Instead, I worry about what might be next — for Iran, for Israel, for the region, for the world, and back home, for American democracy. I recognize that there are factors way beyond my control and your control but also beyond the control of Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu or anyone else. The middle of the story is not a comfortable place to be. But it is the human place. That is what Purim teaches us.

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