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The Mood Swings of the Nation's Capital

As we prepare to celebrate Purim with Washington *Habira* pulled in opposing political directions, it is worth considering its counterpart in *Megillat Esther*, the capital city of Shushan.

Shushan plays prominently in the book of Esther such that the low and high points of the Purim story are described in terms of the mood of that city. When Haman successfully decreed the annihilation of the Jews, we are told (Esther 3:15) that “the law was laid down in the imperial city of Shushan. The king and Haman sat down to drink, and the city of Shushan stood aghast and confused.” And when things turn in the opposite direction (Esther 8:14-15), “the law was laid down in the imperial city of Shushan. Mordechai left the kings’ presence in royal garments... and the city of Shushan was filled with jubilation and happiness.”

Shushan was the kingdom’s capital city with a mixed population of Jews and non-Jews. While some commentaries suggest that the confusion and joy described here was reserved for its Jewish population, the targets of the decrees, the text itself seems to indicate that these shifts in mood affected all the residents of the city as all were impacted by who was ascendant in

the politics of the kingdom. This point was made by the Talmudic sage Rava (Megillah 11a) who introduced his discussion of the Megillah by relating the opposing moods of the city of Shushan to the proverb (Mishlei 29:2), “When the righteous are on the increase (Mordechai), the people (of Shushan) rejoice; but when the wicked man (Haman) rules, the people (of Shushan) mourn.”

Haman’s rise to prominence resulted in a call for the genocide of the Jews, leading not only the Jews to grieve. The imperial city of Shushan that from the beginning of the Purim story is described and treated as the intimate circle of the king is thrown into turmoil by this new favored player on the scene whose relationship with them was defined from the outset by power and humiliation, who compelled everyone to kneel and bow before him. Haman’s ascendancy is described by his elevated throne (3:1), the seat of his power. The entire city was aghast and confused by this unfamiliar source of political influence and the forceful and destructive direction in which he was pulling the king, changing the very culture of the capital city.

The tables turned and Haman was removed and replaced by Mordechai, the

advocate for the king, whose elevation is described (Esther 8:15) by the royal clothing in which he was dressed, the *techeilet*, *argaman* and linen that are reminiscent of the garments of the Kohein (see Ramban Shemos 28:2). The Kohein was the humble servant of God whose position was to serve and to unify the people with God and with each other and who was so distant from the throne-like seat of power that he was not even permitted to sit in the Temple in which he served. Mordechai was a similarly humble, righteous, and reassuring presence who initially rose to prominence by saving the king's life. The shift of political influence from the egotistical, power-hungry, and vicious Haman to a person with Mordechai's humility, righteousness, and goodness was welcomed by the entire city, not only its Jews, as it restored a culture of civility and goodness to the city.

Remarkably, it was insufficient for Mordechai and Esther to restore a pleasant equilibrium to the kingdom. All they had sought was the rescinding of the genocidal decree against the Jews, but the king advised that they could not simply undo that decree without turning the tables and fighting back. And while initially that may have been seen as a necessary response to the legalities of the irrevocable initial decree of genocide against them, Mordechai and Esther came to recognize that in the power dynamics of the kingdom, they needed to assert themselves and asked the king that in the imperial city of Shushan, at the seat of power, they be given one additional day to not only defend themselves but to assert their dominance.

Nevertheless, the joy of the city

– including its non-Jewish inhabitants – remained. They understood that whereas the evil Haman introduced weaponry and destruction as his way, the humble and righteous Mordechai would do the opposite. Yes, he would do whatever needed to be done with power and might to reset the dynamics of the kingdom, but to him it was simply a step towards the day after, the day that would be celebrated by the Jews for their being able to finally put away their weapons. The Jewish people stood up for themselves decisively in battle but proceeded to commemorate their victory with acts of kindness, *mishloach manos u'matanos l'evyonim*, sending food to one another and gifts to the poor. The Jewish people whose mission is to live up to the Divine image with which every human being is endowed, recognizes that to triumph over evil requires fighting harsh battles, but proceeds to celebrate that victory by returning to engage in acts of kindness, caring and charity. “The city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad.”

Rival political forces rally in our contemporary Shushan, struggling against each other to influence the king. While one side rallies in a menacing tone, often celebrating those who commit murder and savagery, the others stand in a circle, swaying in song to the words *hinei mah tov u'mah na'im shevet achim gam yachad*, “how good and pleasant it is for brother to live together in unity.” The first group will leave the city aghast, confused, covered in graffiti and broken glass, while the other – if they would only be allowed to – would bring it joy and gladness. ■