



## Torah Reflections on *Purim*

Genesis 23:1 – 25:18

13 Adar II, 5771 March 19-20, 2011

In my work as a pastoral caregiver, as well as in the rest of my daily life, I try to remember to look for holiness even in the places where it is the most hidden. I seek it in stories of heartbreak and loss, just as I seek it in moments of gladness. As pastoral educator Mildred Best says, “[A]ll stories are about God, whether God is mentioned or not.”<sup>[1]</sup>

This observation is particularly apt during this season of Purim when we read the biblical book of Esther – which, over the course of ten chapters, contains not a single reference to God. The book of Esther is a story about courage in the face of adversity. At the beginning of the story, Esther wows King Achashverosh with her beauty and ascends to the throne – without telling her new husband that she is Jewish. Esther enters into life in the royal palace but her foster-father, Mordecai, remains her connection to the Jewish people. And so, when King Achashverosh issues a decree that every Jew in the empire is to be massacred on the 13<sup>th</sup> day of Adar, Mordecai sends a message to Esther that she must act.

Mordecai instructs Esther to go before the King and plead on her people’s behalf. Esther responds that she cannot do this because those who appear before the King without an invitation risk their lives. Mordecai sends a message back warning Esther that she will not ensure her own safety by keeping silent. Referring twice to *eit zot*, which literally means “this time,” Mordecai encourages her to act. In fact, he says, perhaps she arrived in her current position of being Queen precisely so that she might act in *eit zot*, this time. This is all Esther needs to hear. The rest, as we say, is history. Esther summons all of her courage, fasts for three days and nights, and successfully convinces Achashverosh to reverse his decree.

Where is God in this story? Innumerable generations of Jewish commentators have found innumerable answers to this story. Here is one more. I draw my understanding of who and what God is from my broader definition of spirituality. For me, spirituality is about being connected to something beyond ourselves, whether this is God, the cosmos, music, art, tradition, community, family, history, or any one of the numerous other things that give our lives meaning. It is also about being connected to *eit zot*, to the time in which we find ourselves. It is about being able to live in the ebb and flow of life’s joys and disappointments, hopes and fears, triumphs and losses.

In my work with family members who are caring for a loved one at the end of life, I am constantly reminded of the holiness that comes from living in *this time* – however unwelcome or unwanted this time might be. As I spend time with children, parents,

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<sup>[1]</sup> Mildred Best, “Reflecting Theologically.” Ed. William R. DeLong, *Courageous Conversations: The Teaching and Learning of Pastoral Supervision* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2010), 15.

spouses, partners, siblings, and other family members who have taken on the task of caring for a terminally ill loved one, I notice that more often than not caregivers embrace the task they have been handed. Even as they talk about the very real challenges with which they are dealing, they tend to affirm that they would not choose anything else. They cannot imagine anything other than *this time*. Sometimes they say this is what they are meant to be doing. It feels like part of a larger plan, they say, similar to Mordecai's suggestion to Esther that she became Queen in order to live fully in the time in which she found herself.

As with all hospice teams, my co-workers and I seek ways to lighten caregivers' burdens. We do not dismiss or underestimate the magnitude of what caregivers do. We help families access home health aides and we provide volunteers who offer relief for a few hours. We support caregivers with our words and with our presence. And we affirm caregivers' strength and courage. We affirm their powerful ability to live in *eit zot* and to live life connected to others.

As in Esther's story, these caregivers' lives become tales of courage in the face of adversity. God's name may or may not be written into their stories, but with their love and patience and determination caregivers expand into *eit zot* and sway in time with the winds that blow through their lives.

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