

Purim in Persia and Iran

During his visit to the White House on March 5, 2012, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave President Barack Obama a copy of the Book of Esther (the Megillah), the biblical story of the plan by the chief minister of the great Persian Empire to annihilate all the Jews in the kingdom. To understand the Middle East today, it's worth reading.

The story relates that the King Ahasuerus (perhaps Xerxes 1), after executing his wife Queen Vashti, married Esther who did not mention she was Jewish. Haman, the king's vizier (chief adviser), was annoyed that Mordechai, her cousin, had refused to bow to him. As a result, Haman convinced the king to issue a decree ordering the extermination of all Jews. This genocide was to be implemented on one day, the 13th of the Hebrew month of Adar, a date chose by lot (in Persian, *pur*)

Haman's behavior was a harbinger of both Nazi ideology and the paranoia of Joseph Stalin. His words echo those of Adolf Hitler: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your realm. Their laws are different from those of every other people's, and they do not observe the king's law; therefore it is not fitting to tolerate them."

Stalin may not have been contemplating genocide but in 1953 he was planning to deport Jews to Siberia. However, he suffered a stroke on the eve of Purim, March 1953, and died a few days later.

Queen Esther, with Mordechai, changed Jewish history by preventing the genocide from happening. She revealed her Jewish identity to the king, while Mordechai, who had saved the king's life in an earlier plot to assassinate him, told him of the evil plan of Haman. They convinced the king to arrest Haman and to issue a second decree. By this the Jews

were permitted to defend themselves and kill those who were preparing to annihilate them. They did so on 13th Adar and celebrated the next day on 14th Adar. This day of deliverance is now commemorated as the Jewish festival of Purim, a day of rejoicing. It is a carnival-like festival when gifts are exchanged. When the Megillah is read in the synagogue, the name of Haman, mentioned 54 times, is greeted with noisemakers (graggers) and stamping of feet to get rid of the evil name.

By coincidence, Prime Minister Netanyahu is due to speak before the Joint Session of Congress on 13th Adar, which is March 3, 2015, the eve of Purim, on the subject of Iran, the modern state that was originally the Persian Empire. The use of analogies in politics is always perilous, but it worth remembering the historical events that took place in the great Persian Empire with its 127 provinces, in the context of today's Islamic regime, and the invitation to the Israeli prime minister.

Queen Esther was forbidden to speak to the king without being summoned. Netanyahu was not summoned by the U.S. head of state, who is unwilling to meet him, but only by the Speaker of the House, John Boehner. She realized the plight of the Jewish people in Persia who were threatened by Haman's plan for annihilation. Netanyahu recognizes the current plight of the Jewish people in Israel whose survival is endangered by the threat of annihilation from Iranian nuclear bombs.

Mordechai refused to bow down to the chief Persian politician. Netanyahu did not seek permission of the U.S. leader to speak his mind. Queen Esther managed to persuade the king to change his mind, and save the Jewish people. Netanyahu is attempting to persuade the U.S. Congress to take action and save the Jewish people today. The evil Haman was hanged because of his plan to kill all the Jews. Netanyahu may suggest sanctions on Iran to prevent a similar plan, one that only has the objective of annihilating the State of Israel but is also a threat to the whole democratic world and to Saudi

Arabia and the Sunni Islam world.

The political theater performed by all sides around this invitation to Netanyahu and the absurd accusations of breach of protocol and disrespect for President Obama, obscures the only real issue involved. It is not a matter of the root causes of alleged Iranian grievances. The vital question is whether Iran will maintain the capacity to enrich uranium and thus will be in the position of making nuclear weapons. Iran, like the evil Haman who wanted to destroy the Jews of yore, maintains the objective of annihilating the Jewish State of Israel. At the core of the issue is the question of whether the imposition of new sanctions on Iran, which Obama opposes, can lead to preventing or delaying for a long period, that undesirable outcome of Iranian nuclear ambition.

It is difficult to understand why some elected members of Congress are peevishly unwilling to listen to all views about the Iranian nuclear ambition. Perhaps they have not heard the demonstrations in the streets of Iran on February 11, 2015, commemorating the 36th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, with the shouts of "Down with America," and "Death to Israel." They surely must have heard about the murders of Jews in Paris and in Copenhagen committed by Islamist anti-Semites in recent days.

A speech by the Israeli prime minister in Congress is an opportunity to open a realistic debate on the negotiations between the U.S. and Iran. Permitting Netanyahu to speak is not advocacy for a military strike on Iran or for inducing the U.S. to put "boots on the ground" there. It is not interference in U.S. political affairs, though a group of Democrats are currently interfering in Israeli affairs by advising the political opponents of Netanyahu. The speech may, as a minimum, lead Congress to discuss flaws in the ongoing nuclear discussions with Iran, or about the urgency of the instillation of a strong inspection process of Iran's activities. Congress might also ascertain if the reports are

true that the U.S. has stopped updating Israel on the state of the discussions.

The festival of Purim, symbolizing the defeat of enemies of the Jewish people, is celebrated, along with other activities, by the eating of hamantaschen, (translated as the pockets or ears of the evil Haman,) triangular-shaped cookies with a prune or poppy seeds in the center. Will the members of Congress boycotting, even if they pretend otherwise, the speech of Netanyahu be eating those delicious cookies on March 3, the eve of Purim?

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