



Purim 2022

Chaotic Good

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Book of Esther opens with a long prologue, introducing a detailed and vivid snapshot of life in Persia. It tells us about a six-month festival honoring the mighty Persian Empire, culminating in a seven-day feast for noble aristocrats and foreign diplomats at King Achaverosh's royal palace. The story includes a long exposition on the materials of the columns, couches, drapes, pavements, cups, decanters, and food. We then learn that in his drunken state, the king summoned the queen to present herself in front of all his guests, but she refused. Insulted by her refusal, and on the advice of his entire cabinet, he ordered her execution. The story then goes into lengthy detail about the meticulous search process for a suitable replacement and how the royal retainers trained the potential candidates in etiquette and protocol before establishing that Esther's beauty and grace won everyone's admiration, and she was named queen.

This is not the typical introductory structure of the stories we are familiar with. Consider that the Exodus, our most consequential story, is very short on extraneous detail – a few terse sentences about the rise of a new Pharaoh who didn't know Yosef or his family; how the new Pharaoh gradually subjugated and enslaved his Jewish subjects; and how a man from the house of Levi had a son, who would grow up to be Moshe, their savior. The backstory is set only very briefly, allowing the main story to take center stage and unfold.

So why does the Book of Esther have such a long and drawn-out prologue?

The Chasam Sofer suggests that the main story is all too familiar to us – שְׁבָכָל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ – וְהַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם. The main story's abstract is that there was an existential threat, so the Jews turned to God for help, crying, fasting, and praying, and God ultimately listens to their pleas for salvation.

Yet what's makes this particular version different is precisely that long prologue.

This story marks a paradigm shift – the end of an age of miracles and prophecy. God does not appear in this story, and His guiding hand is only apparent to us, the readers. But while we can probably recognize God's hand influencing the story's main events, we can also spot it in the long prologue. Before the main story had even begun, God's hand is evident to us, arranging all the pieces for the endgame.



We should also recognize that the festival and party the story opens with were a national victory celebration of conquest; the Persian Empire had just conquered Israel and exiled the Jews, and many of those very Jews participated and partook in this party! While we might reasonably expect God to have some compassion for contrite Jews desperately praying to be saved, could we so reasonably expect God to be delighted with Jews joining a celebration of their own downfall and the loss of the Holy Land? And yet, this story so clearly tells us that God was watching in those moments as well, long before the Jews turned to Him and long before there was a threat or any semblance of structure to the story yet to unfold.

Our sages identify Haman with Amalek, the eternal foe, whose primary weapon is chance and chaos. Haman attempted to co-opt chaos by using a lottery, a game of chance, to identify an auspicious day for a genocide.

But not only did the lottery fail, but the chaos Haman attempted to weaponize was also his undoing – Mordechai broke the law and refused to bow, and Esther broke protocol when she went to the king with no summons; both articulations of chaotic good. One of the Purim story's clear morals is that chaos and chance are forces within God's ambit and purview.

In a sense, it's actually the very first thing we know about God from the very dawn of creation; that God exists amid a formless void and then organizes that chaos into the order of creation – וְהָאֵרֶץ הָיְתָה – תהו ובהו וחסך על-פני תהום ורוח אלהים מרחפת על-פני המים. It's the mistake Haman made, and it's the heresy of Amalek; Amalek's observation that the world looks coincidental and random is not wrong, but the conclusion is. Things may look a certain way, but things aren't truly how they appear – which happens to be exactly what the custom of dressing up expresses.

The Ishbitzer suggests that this also underlies the custom of drinking to intoxication on Purim to the point we can't distinguish between Haman and Mordechai. By letting go of knowledge as an empirical process, we abandon any semblance of order or structure and embrace chaos; we know from the Purim story that before anything and everything, that not only can we find God in the chaos, but that chaos has served God's purposes all along – there is simply no way it could ever pose a threat.

The lesson the Book of Esther has to teach us is in the details of the long prologue – the chance and the trivial are all in play for God's masterplan; us knowing readers get to recognize how all the stars aligned to set the story up for its ending long before the story had even begun. God may appear distant, but He's there if we're looking.

But, as we learn from the long prologue, He's there even when we're looking away.

[Refusing the Call](#)



4 minute read | Straightforward

Before introducing us to Moshe, the Torah describes how Yakov’s family grew numerous and how the Egyptian government felt threatened by such a sizable population of outsiders. Determined to curb this threat, they devised a means to subjugate the Jewish People, which they slowly dialed up until it became intolerable. Once the Torah has established the setting, the Torah tells us of Moshe’s birth and upbringing before he has to flee.

Moshe encounters the mysterious burning bush on his travels, and God calls on him to save his people. Curiously, Moshe refuses this call:

וַעֲמָה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רָאִיתִי אֶת־הַלַּחֲץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: וַעֲמָה לָכֵה וְאַשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים מִי אֲנֹכִי כִּי אֵלֶךְ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְכִי אוֹצִיא אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם: ... וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־ה' בִּי אֲדֹנָי: "The cry of the Children of Israel has reached Me; I have seen how the Egyptians oppress them. Come! I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt." But Moshe said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Children of Israel from Egypt?"... Moshe said to God, "Please God, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now that You have spoken to Your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." (3:9-11, 4:10)

This is the beginning of one of the most epic and important stories ever told. Moshe knows where he comes from and has seen his brethren suffering, and his birth and upbringing uniquely situated him to do something about it. No less than the Creator has called on him to greatness, and he refuses; not once, but twice!

How could Moshe possibly refuse the call?

It’s essential to understand that refusing the call is not just a literary trope that humanizes the hero; because this story isn’t ordinary literature. If Moshe could refuse the call, and his refusal is part of this timeless story, it reflects a fundamental property intrinsic to all humans we need to acknowledge and understand.

It wasn’t that Moshe doubted that his people could or should be saved; it’s that Moshe doubted himself. He had fears and insecurities – he didn’t think he was worthy of such a great mission. He didn’t think he had what it takes, and he was missing what he believed to be a key trait to be successful – he wasn’t a man of words! How would he persuade anybody to follow him? How would he advocate for his people to the Egyptian government? This isn’t faux humility – Moshe is articulating an accurate self-assessment; he is right! And yet, the answer seems to be that none of that matters at all, that he has to get on with it just the same.

In the Purim story, Esther also refuses the call, not wanting to risk her life. Mordechai gives her a similar response – she has correctly assessed the facts and is indeed in danger. But that doesn’t



matter; the call to action stands open, and someone has got to respond. If Esther focuses on her fears and flaws, then she will lose the opportunity to step up, and someone else will – כי אם־הִתְרַשׁ תְּהָרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמוּד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאֵת וּבֵית־אֲבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם־לָעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעְתָּ לְמַלְכוּת.

The book of Jeremiah opens with a similar vignette. Jeremiah reports that God appeared to him and called upon him to be that generation’s prophet. Like Moshe, Jeremiah protests that he is just a kid and is not a speaker, and in what we can now recognize as a consistent fashion, God dismisses these excuses – not because they are wrong; but because they ultimately don’t matter – וַיְהִי דְבַר־ה’ אֵלַי לֵאמֹר: בְּטָרִם אֶצְרָךְ בְּבֶטֶן יְדֻעֲתִיךָ וּבְטָרִם תֵּצֵא מִרְחֹם הַקִּדְשׁוֹשְׁתִּיךָ נְבִיא לְגוֹיִם נִתְּתִיךָ: וְאָמַר אֶהְיֶה אֲדֹנָי הַהִנֵּה לֹא־יְדַעְתִּי דְבַר כִּי־נָעַר אָנֹכִי: וַיֹּאמֶר ה’ אֵלַי אֲל־תֹּאמַר נָעַר אָנֹכִי כִי עַל־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁלְחֶךָ תִּלְדֶּה וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תַּדְבֵּר.

Who is perfect enough to fix the problems you see around your community? Who is perfect enough to lead the people you love to greatness? Ironically, the person deluded and narcissistic enough to think he is perfect enough is the worst candidate. The Torah seems to be saying that it has got to be you – אֲל־תֹּאמַר נָעַר אָנֹכִי.

If we have adequately honed our sensitivities, we recognize we have a lot of work to do and that so many people need help. We might even hear a call to action in our lives vibrating deep within us, but it’s not enough. We doubt ourselves, and we refuse the call. We’re scared – and we should be! There is plenty to be scared of, and the stakes couldn’t be higher. The undertaking the Torah calls us to is enormous, too enormous to accomplish on our own; yet it calls on us just the same – לֹא עָלֶיךָ הַמְּלָאכָה – לְגֹמֵר, וְלֹא אַתָּה בְּן חוֹרֵין לְבַטֵּל מִמֶּנָּה.

The moral fiber is in quieting that voice of self-doubt that makes us refuse the call and stepping up to answer – אִם אֵין אָנִי לִי, מִי לִי. וּכְשֶׁאָנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אָנִי –

The Torah calls on humans, keenly aware of our fears, flaws, imperfection, and insecurities. We mustn’t engage those self-same fears, flaws, imperfections, and insecurities as excuses to shirk our duty. The Torah repeatedly tells us they just don’t matter; there’s work to do!

Moshe, Esther, and Jeremiah all expressed a form of impostor syndrome, the feeling that whatever job you’re in, you’re not qualified for it and that people are going to figure out any minute that you’re a poser with no clue what you’re doing. Your self-awareness serves you well by accurately identifying gaps in your skillset, but does you a disservice by stopping you from trying. You have to silence the doubt in yourself when it gets to the point of holding you back from doing transformational things simply because you’re not quite ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

Our pantheon of heroes is replete with imperfect individuals who had good reasons to refuse the call. Each reason was entirely accurate; we ought to draw immense comfort and power from how universal self-doubt is. The Torah’s consistent thematic response to our doubts, and through them to us, echoing and reverberating for all eternity, is simply that there’s work to do, and someone has to do it.



So why shouldn't it be you?

Fooled by Randomness

8 minute read | Advanced

Although the Purim story unfolded over a protracted period, we celebrate the holiday on the fourteenth of Adar. The date is quite unusual, in the sense that with most holidays, something happened at some time, and we celebrate the holiday on its anniversary. That's not quite the case with Purim because half the story, and the name itself, revolve around why events happened on that particular date.

Haman, the antagonist, decided to mandate a legal genocide, a one-day purge against the Jewish People. That's a bad thing; he's a bad guy, it's not hard to understand. But in a perplexing turn of events, although he had it all figured out, he wasn't quite sure when his law should take effect, so he cast a lottery to determine the right day and settled on the fourteenth of Adar – על־כֶּן קָרְאוּ לַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה – פּוּרִים עַל־שֵׁם הַפּוּר.

Casting lots is distantly removed from our primary experience, and seeing as it is a core feature of the holiday in some sense, we ought to take it seriously.

Why would Haman cast a lottery?

Today, we understand that a lottery applies randomness to confound any notion of predictability. When a process can generate all outcomes with equal probability, we will perceive the outcome as fair. The Torah uses this methodology to choose between goats on Yom Kippur and to allocate the tribal portions of Israel.

Today, we would use a coin toss as a conventionally reasonable way to decide between two equal options, heads or tails. It's intuitive, it's fair, it makes sense, and there's nothing to argue about – בְּהִיק – יוּטֵל אֶת־הַגּוֹרֵל וַיִּמָּה' כַּל־מִשְׁפָּטוֹ / מִדִּינִים יִשְׁבִּית הַגּוֹרֵל וּבֵין עֲצוּמִים יִפְרִיד.

Which goat is the scapegoat isn't a question of ultimate destiny and fate. It could be either; it doesn't matter at all. Which portion of land goes to which tribe doesn't really matter either; it could be any, and that's the point, that's why it's fair.

But that's not the only way the ancients understood lotteries.



Ancient civilizations would sometimes cast lots as cleromancy, a form of divination where Divine Providence is attributed to a particular outcome – השגחה פרטית. By removing any human element of choice as to what course of action to take, the thinking went, destiny and fate can reveal themselves. The Torah uses this form of lottery to identify a looter, Achan, who illegally claimed spoils in the Book of Joshua; to correctly identify that Jonathan had violated Saul’s vow; and by Jonah’s Gentile shipmates to determine whose fault the terrible storm was.

Cleromancy, the second form of lottery, has nothing whatsoever to do with fairness. It’s about ascribing divine significance to a random outcome, treating it as the Divine Will, and proceeding accordingly. Achan was the guilty looter, and no one else; Jonathan, and not someone else, had broken the vow; Jonah, and not some other sailor or passenger, was responsible for the storm. They faced real consequences in the material world due to their divinely ordained guilt through cleromancy.

The Torah explicitly forbids utilizing this second form of lottery multiple times in uncharacteristically strong terms – לא תנחשו ולא תעונו / לא תמצא בך מעביר בנו ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונו ומנחש ומכשף... כִּי־תוֹעֵבֶת ה' – לא תנחשו ולא תעונו / לא תמצא בך מעביר בנו ובתו באש קסם קסמים מעונו ומנחש ומכשף... תמים תהיה עם ה' אלוקיך. Whether that’s how the magic works doesn’t even matter; what matters is that people ascribe divine significance to cleromancy and act accordingly, and that’s why the Torah takes great issue with superstition.

To hone in on why Haman cast lots, we need to determine which kind of lottery he utilized. There’s no use for a lottery between dates because laws take effect whenever they are relevant – you’ll ban membership of a new terrorist group instantly, but you’ll update tax laws years before they take effect seeing as you want everyone to have time to take notice. Deferring scheduling to a lottery for fairness makes no sense, because all dates are already equally random, which is to say, fair; the question of when is trivial and mundane, and so is the answer – genocide this Friday is every bit as good as genocide next Wednesday. We can be quite certain that Haman didn’t need a lottery for scheduling purposes.

Far more sinister, Haman cast a lottery to seek divine sanction for his genocidal purge. His question wasn’t which moment to start; but which moment was most auspicious for him to succeed. The Purim holiday is named for Haman’s lottery, his lottery of cleromancy and divination, his attempt to predict a divinely sanctioned moment for his plot, and arguably, his attempt to abdicate any choice or responsibility in the matter.

Haman consulted the lottery to determine a very narrow issue – what’s the best day for a successful genocide? This presumes a lot of things, including, among others, the important question of should we genocide at all in the first place?

The entire story revolves around the comical reversal of Haman’s attempt at divination; God’s actual Will guides all outcomes and confounds Haman absolutely. The monstrous and powerful Haman is quickly diminished from the dizzying heights of palace society, helplessly humiliated into a weak and



wretched joke on the way down to an ignominious death, to be publicly derided and laughed at for all time by the children of history.

The Purim story contains a powerful and timeless moral; God is concealed in the story and yet revealed in the outcomes. God alone has the power of outcomes, and we can only hope to recognize God's Hand at play in hindsight retroactively at best, and never prospectively, as Haman attempted. Humans don't control much at all, so the glory of outcomes is God's alone; the small, improbable outcomes that stack to shape the history and reality we know is one of God's most decisive and lauded capabilities – קונה הכל –

As much as religious people might sometimes like to believe, we live in a probabilistic world, not a magical one. Probability distributions accurately describe our universe and predict the expected outcomes of all possible values; it is the language God speaks to us with every day. We can predict how likely something is to happen, but we can only make that prediction in the abstract because God alone has the power of outcomes – הכל בידי שמים –

God operates invisibly in the background, orchestrating everything with the power of outcomes; Haman didn't stand a chance, and we know from history that the bad guys never have a chance either – אֵלֹהִים שֶׁבְּכֹל דּוֹר וְדוֹר עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ, וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם –

But crucially – we can only say that in the abstract. The Jewish People may have survived the Holocaust in an abstract sense, but on a local level, a whole lot of people didn't. When it's your feet in the story, and you stand face to face mortal danger, it's scary, and you have to respond, you have to actually do something. When Haman's plan goes public, no one thinks for a moment that they just need to have faith, that they just need to trust God to do His thing and sort it all out, and that everything is going to be okay. They correctly recognize it as an imminent catastrophe!

When Mordechai encourages Esther to go to the king and make her case to save her people, Esther declines at first because she is afraid – and she should be! She is afraid because she correctly understands that going to the king uninvited is a gross breach of palace protocol and puts her life in serious danger.

Mordechai can't tell her that she's wrong, or even that she's going to be fine. He can't say that because he can't possibly know that – or he would say so! Esther is correct, and all Mordechai can say is that someone has to step up, and it might as well be her, but if she won't, someone else will; which is to say that she can choose to do her part, but must leave the rest to God's power of outcomes.

Even once convinced to accept her fate and role, Esther asks Mordechai to have the Jewish People fast and pray for her success. She was terrified, she wasn't sure it was going to work, she didn't think she would make it through, and Mordechai couldn't correct or reassure her.



Everything is going to be fine, but nobody knows if you're going to be, and that's scary; we should take comfort in the fact our heroes also experienced fear. As one writer put it, the only time you can be brave is when you're afraid. This understanding unlocks the entire story of Purim and perhaps sheds light on some foundational tenets of Judaism, including what faith and trust actually look like in a practical and real sense – אמונה / בטחון –

We are probably overly familiar with the story, too numb for Esther's last words to Mordechai to chill our blood the way they ought to – “and if I die, I die.”

While Haman abdicates his choice and responsibility with his lottery, Esther earns her spot in our pantheon of heroes by choosing to courageously advocate for her people, and she resolves to stand before the king, not because she knows she's going to succeed, but because it is the right thing to do. The outcome of her last stand no longer matters to her because she has accepted that God alone has the power of outcomes; if she dies, she dies, and salvation will come from someplace else. Taking responsibility to make the choice to give her life to this greater cause was a moral victory that made her a heroine worthy of the highest honors.

Mordechai and Esther's determination to do what they could but trust God's power of outcomes is a complete and total inversion of Haman's attempt to control or force the outcome. God alone can see all ends, God alone can determine ultimate destiny and fate; all we have to decide is what to do with the time and opportunities we are given. God's Hand is not directly perceptible to Mordechai and Esther, nor to us; but we can see it in lucky events, where God intervenes without compromising the freedom of His creations, not removing the significance of our choices, but redeeming them. Esther is only responsible for her choice to make her stand, she is not responsible for the outcome, which is in God's hands alone; Esther and Mordechai's immortal hope stands before us forever – ותקוותם לכל דור ודור.

The Purim story is filled with chance and coincidental events and encounters, like Mordechai foiling an assassination attempt, leading to outcomes of such significance that it is plain to readers that they were orchestrated by God.

We believe in God, and God runs the show. But even though Haman can't hurt us, it sure seems like he can, and he certainly hurt some of us, so we have no choice but to act accordingly. Although you don't control the outcome; you must act like you can do something, like what you do matters, because that's the only thing within your power.

If that sounds like our life is theatrics, maybe that's kind of how it is! Our Sages suggest that the Jews were never even in serious danger; God put on a show for them like they'd put on a show in participating in the feast at the story's outset – לא עשו אלא לפנים אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהן אלא לפנים –



TorahRedux

We can get so drunk that there's no difference between Haman and Mordechai, and from the perspective of history, that's perfectly true. God alone has the power of outcomes, and Haman can't hurt us otherwise. We can get blackout drunk and be totally vulnerable; we're safe in God's hands.

Appearances are deceptive, and what you see is not always what you get – our inputs do not always lead to the outcomes we expect or predict, for better and for worse; maybe that's why we dress up in silly costumes and disguises, hiding behind masks.

Chance and probability are the undercurrents of the entire story; they're what the holiday is named for. Purim is the holiday that can never die, and even the somber day of Yom Kippur is but a reflection of Purim. Perhaps everything is like Purim in a sense – it looks random, but it's not.

But crashing down to the reality we inhabit; playing along with the theatre is all we can do. In a hyper-local sense, if you have a test tomorrow, you'd better study and make sure you know the material well. Sure, God runs the world, but the probability distributions conclusively demonstrate that people who know the material usually pass; people who don't study usually fail. You can pass or fail, and maybe the test will never ultimately matter in the fullness of your life, as it unfolds. But you won't ever know that sitting in the room, staring at the paper, scratching your head struggling for an answer.

We can never hope to access the future prospectively; we simply have no idea.

Are you heading in the right direction? Put your best foot forward; have a go and see what happens.

There's only one way to find out.

I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.

I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.

Neli

PS If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?

Redux: *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.