



## Tetzaveh, Zachor, Purim 2023

# The Clothes Make the Man

5 minute read | Straightforward

From all over the world, Jews would come to the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash for spiritual healing and engagement with the divine transcendence. Offering services far beyond the regular public programming and sacrifices, the Kohanim, the priests on duty, would attend to people's personal spiritual needs, helping them bring sacrificial offerings to find atonement or thanksgiving, whatever their circumstances.

The Torah describes a plain and simple uniform that all on-duty Kohanim would wear: linen shorts with a matching long-robed shirt, a belt, and a turban.

The uniform was modest and minimal, but like all dress codes, uniforms pose a challenge. How we dress is a form of self-expression; doesn't imposing a uniform dress code stifle individuality and human freedom?

Clothing is a basic form of self-expression, and self-expression is vital to emotional growth and well-being. We use freedom of expression, including clothing choice, to cultivate the ability to make choices about how we express ourselves, an integral part of learning a broader responsibility for our choices and healthy personal development. If you've ever seen a child put up a big fight about getting dressed, you've seen just how important it is, emotionally speaking, to be able to control your outward appearance as part of being in control of your identity. There should be no question that you can tell something about a person by how they dress. While imprecise, it's directionally accurate.

Yet, be that as it may, the nature of a public-facing service job is that you must somewhat check yourself at the door. There's plenty of time for self-expression, but it might not be the right moment to express yourself fully when a client or patient requires your advice and compassion.

Humans have certain behaviors hardcoded into our biological makeup – we make snap judgments from very thin slices of information, including conclusions from how someone dresses. These are powerful drives, and we'd be lying to ourselves if we thought we could suppress subconscious instincts; they are subconscious. So while there are plenty of highly successful or learned people who avoid formal wear on principle and achieve incredible heights wearing gym clothes and flip flops, the fact remains that when you're trying to impress, regardless of your merits, everyone knows you're better off in a suit than pajamas.



How someone dresses is, of course, not a reliable or proper way to judge a person at all, but the fact remains that appearances matter. Sitting in the emergency room with a troubling health concern, you might get thrown off a little if the doctor walks in with ripped jeans and spiky chains over a tank top. In scrubs or a clown costume, he's still the same doctor; the scrubs also help you.

When you're at the hospital, and you see someone in scrubs in the hallway, you instantly know an incredible amount of relevant and valuable information about that person – they work at the hospital, they know their way around the building, they know a lot about health and the human body, they can direct you where you're trying to go. But most importantly, you know they're there to help you; the hospital dress code utilizes nonverbal communication to foster a sense of comfort and gravity that allows patients and their families to feel comfortable and at ease, all before a single word needs to be said.

And it's no different for spiritual health and well-being.

The Torah mandates a simple dress code for on-duty Kohanim, consisting of a plain and simple uniform, spirit scrubs if you like, out of concern for the weary and troubled souls who came from far and near.

Dress codes are effective. Dress codes work. While it's not an absolute and immutable law, it is a pretty good rule of thumb, a heuristic that primes us to act a certain way. And to be sure, what we're discussing is the textbook definition of superficial – but that's human nature and psychology; we have a strong bias and inclination towards the superficial. The way you present yourself matters.

Dress codes level the playing field by peeling away distractions and removing barriers to people getting what they need. Uniforms aren't intimidating the way fancy clothes are; uniforms aren't off-putting the way old, raggedy clothes are. Everyone on duty appears equal, at least in an outward sense. Uniforms also create a psychological bond, building a group identity that motivates individuals to do more; you see this in the military, police, school, and work. It can help engender feelings of support: you see others working with you and recognize that they aren't just doing it as individuals for personal reasons. When you are servicing the public, it is not about you because you are expressly not representing yourself. Tellingly, the uniforms were procured with public funds and owned by the Beis HaMikdash endowment.

There is nothing inherent about dress codes or uniforms that makes you better at what you do for wearing those clothes, but the fact you're wearing them signals, at least to some people, that you're willing to put them first. And even if you don't think that's true, it is still a reason somebody else might think it is true, and that's reason enough.

Like other uniforms, the Kohanim's uniform conveys information and fosters comfort and security, setting the tone for meaningful and high-signal interactions with spiritual seekers. But like a doctor in scrubs, the dress code is only skin deep.



## TorahRedux

It's important to stress that appearance isn't everything – far from it. No two doctors or people are the same, even though they may wear the same uniform. They each have different personalities and sensitivities, and assuming a basic threshold of competency; they distinguish themselves with their bedside manner – what they're like to interact with. Our Amida also has a uniform structure, morning, noon, and night, Sunday through Friday, yet no two prayers are alike – the feeling we invest in each word is different each time. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that even as similar as the Kohanim's uniform was, each set of clothing still had to be tapered to the contours of the wearer's body, with no loose fabric. No two people are alike, and even two conversations with the same person aren't interchangeable; uniformity doesn't mean homogeneity, and common form is not common substance.

Shakespeare wrote that the clothes make the man, but if that's a little wide of the mark, it's probably correct to say that the clothes set the tone. In your own house, yard, or office, do whatever and be whoever you like. Who's to say otherwise? But in other-facing, client-facing, or public-facing positions, you should be mindful of how you look to people who don't know to give you the benefit of the doubt. Plenty of major companies have relaxed dress codes for non-client-facing positions, but you can be sure that the client-facing positions are suited and booted!

The value articulated by a dress code or uniform policy is that while they may not help everyone, they provide substantial benefits to portions of the population disadvantaged in specific contexts.

So perhaps dress codes don't compromise individuality or self-expression; maybe they curb the outermost and superficial part of ourselves, and that's the part we can afford to sacrifice for other people's comfort in public service.

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## **Amalek Redux**

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Torah has lots of laws. Some are fun and easy to understand, like Shabbos, and some are fun and challenging to understand, like shaking the Lulav. A rare few are difficult to understand and might also leave us with a sense of moral unease.

One of them is the laws concerning Amalek.

On the back of the miraculous Exodus and escape at the Red Sea, the Jewish People were exhausted and weary when a band of raiders called Amalek attacked the stragglers in the group.

Seeing as the Jewish People are the protagonists and our ancestors, we understand that Amalek is the antagonist. But of all the adversaries of Jewish history, Amalek has a unique distinction, sitting in a class of its own. From the earliest Jewish writings, Amalek is the code word for everything that is wrong with the world ideologically.



The story of the Land of Israel is a story of conquest. In many stories, the inhabitants recognize the geopolitical risk and act accordingly, such as Balak, Sichon, and Og. But that's not how the Torah tells the story of Amalek, who attack not out of self-defense, but because they could, and with great dishonor, by targeting weak stragglers.

By most counts, there are no less than three separate duties incumbent on all Jews as it pertains to Amalek: to remember that Amalek attacked the Jewish People just as they left Egypt; not to forget what they did; and the big one, to eradicate the memory of Amalek from the world.

These laws are serious and are part of the rare category of mitzvos that apply to all people at all times under all circumstances.

But isn't it a little unsettling?

It sounds uncomfortably like a mitzvah to commit genocide, the moral argument against which is certainly compelling, especially for a nation who heard the commandment "do not kill" from God's voice at Sinai, even more so having suffered a genocide in living memory. Although some people have no trouble understanding it that way, you're in good company if you find difficulty in a commandment to kill Amalek today.

Long ago, the Gemara dismissed the notion of practicing the straightforward interpretation, pointing to a story in the Prophets where the Assyrian king Sennacherib forcibly displaced and resettled the entire Middle East, eliminating distinct bloodlines of racial descent.

While this elegantly eliminates the problem in a practical sense – there is no problem because the law can no longer apply – the moral issue remains open.

Over centuries, a substantial number of prominent halachic authorities have clarified that the status of Amalek is not racial; that although a tribe called Amalek attacked the Jewish People and formed the context for the law, the law is not and never was an instruction to commit genocide against those people. While the Gemara says that Amalek can never join the Jewish People, it also says that descendants of Amalek taught Torah in Israel, suggesting that their women, or children of women who married out, could lose their identity as Amalek. If Amalek isn't a race, there is no law to kill such a particular group, and there is no moral dilemma.

R' Chaim Brisker explains that Amalek is not a particular group of humans; it is a conceptual category. It's an attitude and ideology that transcends any specific race or individual and persists forever, an archetype of evil that we must fundamentally stand against and be on alert for. Writers through the ages have labeled enemies or opposition as Amalek, which, although often lazy, correctly categorizes and formalizes this eternal struggle.

The perpetrators of the original crime are all dead, and modern society does not believe in the heritability of guilt. But the offense isn't simply that they physically attacked the Jewish People; as



Rashi explains, it's that they cooled us off along the way while we were weary – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַיִּזְנַב בָּהֶם – כִּלְיֵהֶנְחָשׁוּשְׁלִים אֶתְרִיהֶם וְאֶתְהָ עָנָה וַיִּגָּע.

As the Netziv points out, it would be self-defeating and tautological to have an eternal command to destroy something's memory; the Torah makes that impossible simply by mentioning it.

The Kedushas Levi goes further and suggests that Amalek's legacy lies in the heart of every person.

We might stop to wonder if the ideology of Amalek is all around us in the social Darwinist culture we have built ourselves, which is, at its core, a simple application of survival of the fittest behavior.

Sure, the malignant form of Amalek looks like a Haman or a Hitler. But the benign form is all around us, in ourselves and others. It's not any particular humans we need to overcome, but their attitude and ideology. The fight against Amalek does not end even though the nation is long gone; its legacy remains, and it's the legacy that poses a threat.

A Chassidic aphorism observes that Amalek is numerically equivalent to doubt – עמלק / ספק.

In our day-to-day lives, that looks like when you consider doing something bold or different, and someone, perhaps even yourself, pokes holes or second-guesses the new initiative. “I want to try this new idea, but maybe I shouldn't? What if it's the wrong choice? Maybe I don't deserve it?” Or perhaps, “Why start or support that project—aren't there far more important ones?”

The attack in Rephidim only happens opportunistically when people are caught off guard – רַפִּיּוֹן יָדַיִם / רַפִּיּוֹן יָדַיִם.

Anthropologists and psychologists have long observed the phenomenon of crab mentality in some groups. The metaphor derives from a pattern of behavior noted in crabs when trapped in a bucket – any individual crab could easily escape, but the others will undermine its efforts, ensuring the group's collective demise. In some groups, members will attempt to reduce the self-confidence of any member who achieves success beyond the others, whether out of envy, resentment, spite, or competitive feeling, to halt their progress. The wrong circles have powerful inertia that draws members towards conformity and mediocrity in a self-fulfilling negative feedback loop.

Letting feelings of self-doubt and personal incompetence persist is called impostor syndrome. You can baselessly hold back from doing things that could transform your life because you're not ready to face the reality of your own potential greatness.

As the Mishna in Pirkei Avos says, eliminate doubt – הַסְתַּלַּק מִן הַסֶּפֶק.

If it sounds pithy or trite, just know that that's quite literally Amalek's great crime – trying to hold the Jewish People back just as they were beginning to break through, discouraging them just as they were getting started and finding their feet – אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בַּדֶּרֶךְ וַיִּזְנַב בָּהֶם כִּלְיֵהֶנְחָשׁוּשְׁלִים אֶתְרִיהֶם וְאֶתְהָ עָנָה וַיִּגָּע.



It's not apologetics or mental gymnastics; it neatly fits the words and is something we recognize all around us.

Haters rarely hate you; far more often, they hate themselves because you're showing them a reflection of what they wish they could be, and they don't like feeling inadequate.

Shine bright and soar, and forget about the people who tried to hold you back.

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## You Are Not Alone

2 minute read | Straightforward

Our sages teach us that in the utopian world of Mashiach, the holidays as we know them will be modified, scaled back, or otherwise abolished completely. The promise of ultimate redemption will be the most miraculous fulfillment of destiny. Even the Exodus will pale in comparison; it would be like lighting a candle in the daytime. But even though our holiday calendar will look different, there are two holidays we will maintain – Chanuka and Purim.

As with so many aspects of our tradition, and even more so because this is only a prediction, this is disputed; but the position is worth our attention.

Our sages understood Chanuka and Purim as the bridges between the ancient world of prophecy and the world of exile we know so well; as the daytime ends nighttime, so did Esther end the age of miracles.

But there's something unusual about the analogy. We typically associate exile with the archetype of darkness and nighttime, yet our sages liken the age of exile to the daytime.

R' Yonasan Eibeshutz explains that our festivals and holiday commemorate a divine intervention at a particular time. The Creator took the Jewish People out of Egypt. The Creator provided shelter. The Creator gave them the Torah.

But the Purim and Chanuka stories aren't like that; they're the opposite because the Creator doesn't "do" anything at all in these stories. The participants in the story do not interact with the Creator, and the Creator takes no direct action and does not interfere whatsoever. Only the readers get to connect the dots, recognizing the Creator's guiding hand behind the scenes, invisibly weaving events together.

R' Shlomo Farhi teaches that with that in mind, it only follows that Purim and Chanuka would still be celebrated after the final redemption, even long after the other holidays are not. They are the holidays of the exile, showing how even when the Creator seemed more distant, it only ever seemed that way, but in truth, we were never alone for a moment.



We often repeat King David’s prayer about the internalization that the Creator has always been alongside you, shadowing you everywhere you have been:

ה' שומרך, ה' צלך על יד ימינך. ה' ישמור צאתך ובואך מעתה ועד עולם. God is your guardian; God is your shadow. God will protect your arrivals and departures, now and always.

We often associate shadows with darkness, but that’s a mistake.

Shadows only exist in the presence of light. They remind us that there is always light to be found, even in the darkest times.

When you realize the Creator is always with you, you are never alone, lost, or in the dark again. These stories end the age of miracles as the daytime ends the nighttime because they teach us that we don’t need miracles or prophecy to see the Creator.

## **Everything Starts With One**

3 minute read | Straightforward

Our culture is saturated with messaging about efficiency, instant feedback in real-time, and rapid scale and success. But as Steve Jobs said, overnight success stories take a really long time.

What appears sudden to others is the product of many invisible moments and a sustained commitment to pursuing goals and ideals. People who have experienced success will usually admit it was the culmination of a long journey of unseen hard work and dedication filled mostly with countless setbacks and perhaps the occasional win.

The Book of Esther starts slowly, with a lengthy prologue before it gets going, and even when it does get into the main story, the main story goes slowly too. Before Haman rose to power, the story tells us the kind of person Mordechai is and what he’s about – someone who shows up for Esther day after day:

וּבְכָל־יּוֹם וַיֵּשֶׁב מֹרְדֵכָי מִתְּהַלְּלֵי לְפָנֵי חֲצַר בֵּית־הַנְּשִׂים לְדַעַת אֶת־שְׁלוֹם אֶסְתֵּר וּמַה־יַּעֲשֶׂה בָּהּ – And every single day, Mordechai would walk about in front of the women’s quarters, to know how Esther was doing and what was happening with her. (2:11)

After Haman’s rise but before his plot begins, Mordechai is still there every day, only now he’s dealing with daily resistance, defending his refusal to bow to Haman:

וְכָל־עַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ כָּרְעִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים לְהֶמֶן כִּי־כֵן צִוָּה־לוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וּמֹרְדֵכָי לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה ... וַיְהִי כִּאֲמֹרם אֵלָיו יוֹם – All the king’s courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king’s order concerning him; but TorahRedux | Ancient Words, Timeless Wisdom Subscriptions and feedback: Neli@TorahRedux.com



Mordechai would not kneel or bow low... When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordechai's resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew. (3:2,4)

The Sfas Emes highlights how only someone with the dedication and sensitivity to care day in, and day out, who recognizes the value in showing up every day, can withstand the formidable challenge of swimming against a powerful current, resisting the prevailing norm to face off with one of the most powerful villains in Jewish history.

But for the person with that kind of determination and perseverance, this story offers not just a history but a prediction; not just that he did not bow, but that he would not, in the future tense – לֹא יִכְרַע וְלֹא יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה. We all choose whether to bow to the forces of Haman in our lives or whether to go with the flow, getting dragged along through passive inertia.

The Sfas Emes notes that this promise is directed at us, the readers of the future, an assurance that in all times and places, there will always be a person who refuses to bow. When the story introduces us to Mordechai, the protagonist, it doesn't even say his name, giving him a generic title, a Jewish man – אִישׁ יְהוּדִי. It could be anyone; in that particular time and place, his name was Mordechai.

Our sages suggest an alternate reading, not that there was a Jewish man, but that there was a single man, one person who could stand alone in the face of adversity – יְהוּדִי / יְחִידִי.

One doesn't sound like much, but in truth, one is plenty. One spark can burst into flame. One compliment can build newfound confidence. One date can turn into a lifelong relationship.

One person's commitment to their ideals and courage to stand up for their beliefs can inspire others to stand with them. One person's kindness or generosity can generate a ripple effect that influences everything else. One person can change the course of history and leave a lasting impact on the world.

Your choices and actions can extend far beyond yourself and deep into the lives of countless others and catalyze powerful transformation; even minor actions can produce significant results. One idea or action can make a difference.

As the story and this teaching remind us, Mordechai might have been the only one, but one person is all it takes.

One person is enough.

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## Never Enough

4 minute read | Straightforward

Most humans born in the past several thousand years have heard of Moshe; he is rightly one of the most recognized figures in human history.

Today, we might reasonably say that a strange burning bush is no basis for a system of government and that supreme executive power ought to derive from a mandate from the masses – although that’s not the worldview of the Torah’s story. But to the extent there’s some truth to that, we might expect Moshe’s glittering array of accomplishments would eventually win some popular support.

He stood up to Pharaoh and the Egyptian empire and won. He walked a generation of enslaved people into freedom, led them through a suddenly dry ocean, gathered them at Sinai, generating magic food and water along the barren desert waste, among other significant and unparalleled achievements.

And still, the people complained at every turn, resisting him every step of the way.

One particular time, the infamous Korach raised a formidable following and led an attempted coup and insurrection to supplant and usurp his cousin Moshe:

וַיִּקְהֻלוּ עַל־מֹשֶׁה וְעַל־אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב־לָקֶחַם כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה בְּלָמָּה קְדָשִׁים וּבְתוֹכְכֶם הוּא וּמִדּוּעַ תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל־קְהָל הַ – They combined against Moshe and Aaron and said to them, “You have gone too far! All the community are holy, all of them! God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?” (16:3)

Korach directly paraphrases God’s directive at Sinai to be a nation of holy people – וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מְמֻלָּחִים בְּקִדְשֵׁי הַ – כִּי כָל־הָעֵדָה בְּלָמָּה קְדָשִׁים / כִּי־כָל־הָעֵדָה בְּלָמָּה קְדָשִׁים.

This was a grave challenge and threat to Moshe; as one famous quote put it, when you come at the king, you best not miss. Moshe fully understood the severity of the threat and responded rhetorically:

הַמַּעֲט מִכֶּם כִּי־הִבְדִּיל אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַדְת יִשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת מִשְׁכַּן הַ וְלַעֲמֹד לִפְנֵי הָעֵדָה לְשִׁרְתָּם: וַיִּקְרַב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו לְשִׁרְתָּם וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם – “Is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has set you apart from the community of Israel and given you direct access, to perform the duties of God’s Tabernacle and to minister to the community and serve them? Now that God has advanced you and all your fellow Levites with you, do you seek the priesthood too?!” (16:9,10)

But Moshe’s rhetoric appears to fall quite flat. There is no challenge or rebuttal to what Korach has claimed, no counter, checkmate, or riposte. It is only a restatement!

So when Moshe accuses him of wanting to be part of the priesthood – וַיִּבְקֹשׂתֶם גַּם־כִּהֲנֵנָה – it’s hard to see how that would give Korach a moment’s pause. Korach would simply say yes, precisely!

Where is Moshe’s winning argument?



The Shem Mi'Shmuel explains that Moshe's accusation towards Korach was about how self-serving his coup was. Moshe's rhetoric pierces through Korach's claim of shared holiness; because, true as it might be, Korach's words are empty and self-serving. God wants people dedicated to God's purposes; Korach was out for himself – for power and influence, personal gain, and honor – בקשָׁתָם / תְּהִירוֹתָי.

Moshe's entire story prominently features the enormous personal cost and self-sacrifice required to lead and serve his people faithfully. Ahron's entire story was about connecting people with the divine and closer to each other. Korach's accusation of overstepping – רַב־לָכֶם – rings hollow; Moshe's accusation of Korach self-serving rings true – בקשָׁתָם.

But perhaps there's more to Moshe's retort.

Our sages associate Korach with another famous villain – Haman.

Both were fabulously wealthy; our sages say they were two of the richest men in the world.

Both were highly influential; Haman was second only to the king, and Korach was in the highest tier as well. While Moshe and Ahron had the most visible roles, Korach and the whole family of Levi had critical and desirable roles in the new Jewish religion – הַבְּדִיל אֱלֹקֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶתְכֶם מֵעַד תִּשְׂרָאֵל לְהַקְרִיב אֶתְכֶם אֵלָיו – לְעַבֵּד אֶת־עַבְדֹת מִשְׁכַּן הַיְלָל לְעֹמֵד לְפָנַי הַיְעֲדָה לְשִׁרְתָּם.

But with all Haman's influence, prestige, power, and wealth, it wasn't worthwhile to him without one thing:

– וְכִלְיוֹן אֵינְנו שׁוֹה לִי בְּכָל־עֵת אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת־מֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמָּלְךְ: “Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordechai sitting in the palace gate!”

Perhaps the rhetoric in Moshe's reply to Korach is similar – הַמַּעַט מִכֶּם – is everything Korach already has so trivial? Are all the duties, honors, and privileges of the Mishkan still not enough?

Korach craves the one thing out of reach, the priesthood, without which everything counts for naught. Haman desires the one thing out of reach, Mordechai's submission, without which everything counts for naught. Not only do they take their blessings for granted, they outright trivialize, discount, and devalue everything they have – הַמַּעַט מִכֶּם.

What's more, our sages note that the Torah refers to Haman in the story of Adam and Eve, hinted in God's language to Adam asking if they ate from the Tree of Knowledge, which can be read as an oblique allusion to Haman – הַמֶּן / הַמִּזְרֵה־הַעֵץ אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִיךָ לִבְלֹתָי אֲכַל־מִמֶּנּוּ אֶכְלֶתָ –

Dayan Chanoch Ehrentrau observes that Adam and Eve's mistake is the same color. God creates the entire universe for them; all of Creation is at their disposal in the palm of their hand. But they crave the one thing out of reach, one tree they can't eat from, without which everything falls stale and flat.



It's the same mistake as Korach and Haman, a consistent and recurring mistake humans make from the beginning.

While there is plenty of room for healthy ambition and aspirations for tomorrow, you must still value and appreciate where you stand today; otherwise, what's it all worth? While you can say you appreciate your blessings, your actions may indicate otherwise.

Gratitude and its inverse form, taking things for granted, are recursive throughout the Torah, consistently one of its core themes and a leading indicator of prosperity or disaster. Korach, Haman, and Adam and Eve all suffered severe punishment for taking their blessings for granted – they lost everything, and everything quickly turned to nothing.

They say you don't know what you've got until it's gone, but sometimes you do know what you have; you just never think you'll lose it while you chase the next thing.

Appreciate what you have, and who loves and cares for you. Don't take the people or things in your life for granted, not just because nothing lasts forever – but because, as Moshe said, is it not enough?

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## **Chaotic Good**

4 minute read | Straightforward

The Book of Esther opens with a long prologue, introducing a detailed and vivid snapshot of life in the mighty Persian Empire.

It tells us about a six-month festival, culminating in a seven-day feast for noble aristocrats and foreign diplomats at the royal palace. The story includes a long exposition on the materials of the columns, couches, cups, decanters, drapes, food, and pavements. We learn that the king drunkenly summons the queen to present herself in front of all his guests, but she refuses. Insulted by her refusal and on the advice of his entire cabinet, he orders her execution.

The story then goes into lengthy detail about the meticulous search process for a suitable replacement and how the royal retainers train the potential candidates in etiquette and protocol before establishing that Esther's beauty and grace win universal admiration, and she is named queen.

This differs from the typical structure of the stories we are familiar with. Consider that the Exodus, our most consequential story, is very short on introductory 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 briefly, allowing the main story to take center stage and unfold. The Book of Esther takes a while to get going.



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

The main story abstract is familiar to us; 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 – שְׂבָכָל דּוֹר וָדוֹר – עוֹמְדִים עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ וְהַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא מְצִילֵנוּ מִיָּדָם.

The Chasam Sofer suggests that what makes this particular version different is precisely the long prologue.

This story marks a paradigm shift – the end of an age of miracles and prophecy. The Creator does not appear in this story, and His guiding hand is only apparent to us readers. But while we can easily recognize God’s hand influencing the story’s main events, we can also spot it in the long prologue, how before the main story has even begun, God’s hand arranges all the disparate pieces for the endgame.

We should recognize that the festival and party the story opens with were a national victory celebration of conquest and victory; the Persian Empire had conquered Israel and exiled the Jews, many of whom attended this party! While we might reasonably expect God to have some compassion for contrite Jews desperately praying to be saved, could we reasonably expect that God would be pleased with Jews joining the celebration of their downfall and the loss of the Holy Land? And yet, this story tells us that God was watching in those moments too long before the Jews turned to Him and before the threat rose, before any semblance of story structure had 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 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 story’s key themes is that chaos and chance are forces within God’s ambit and purview.

It’s actually one of very first things we know about God, from the very dawn of creation; that God exists amid a formless void and then organizes chaotic void into the order of creation – וְהָאֲרֶץ הָיְתָה תוֹהוּ – וְבָהוּ וְהָשָׁף עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם.

Haman’s mistake is the heresy of Amalek; the observation that the world looks coincidental and random is not wrong, but the conclusion is. Things can look a certain way, but things aren’t all they appear. We express this theme with the custom of dressing up.

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



## TorahRedux

Purim story that before anything and everything, 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 Creator is hidden in the story; Mordechai has no cause to believe in a happy ending. And yet the readers can follow the trail of breadcrumbs every step of the way.

The stories contained in the Torah and prophets are passed down to us because generation after generation decided that they had eternal relevance; the Book of Esther captures a mood that is real in the story and real for us. For we who have never seen prophets or prophecy, these books are all we have to hold onto. The Book of Esther tells us that the breadcrumbs in that story are also present in our lives, even if our stories appear chaotic and disorganized.

If Purim was an event that happened through a natural course of events, then the same force that existed for them persists and is transferable. It can and does reveal itself repeatedly; in the fullness of time, chaos produces nothing but order.

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 the breadcrumbs are there if we're looking.

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

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*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](mailto:Neli@TorahRedux.com).*

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

Neli

**PS** - *TorahRedux is my pride and joy, the product of thousands of hours of learning, research, writing, editing, and formatting. I have been blessed to operate a business that allows me to dedicate a substantial amount of time to TorahRedux, and I welcome your assistance in furthering my goal to keep publishing high-quality Parsha content that makes a difference. I broker healthcare businesses for sale; I kindly ask for your blessings and prayers, and introductions to anyone who might want to buy or sell a healthcare business!*



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***PPS** - It took me years to start making a parnassa; if anyone you know is looking for a job, please put them in touch with me. With a helping hand from Above, I have successfully helped **8 people** find jobs so far!*

**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.