

Is This The Feast That We Desire?

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Adar is the season of carnival, with Purim dancing around the equinox alongside Nowruz, Tết Nguyên Đán, May Day, and other celebrations of reversal and renewal.

But **carnival has two faces**. The Monogram Hunters – and the Krewe of Comus. The Jouvert dawn parade – and the plantation-owners' ball. Mummers performing house-to-house – and the church-authorized satirical sermon. On one side, the vernacular, rooted, refusal of constraints, not imagining or prefiguring the freedom of a world to come, but practicing a different life in this world, even temporarily. On the other, a momentary pressure-release to evade lasting change, a rhetoric of freedom used to tighten the existing order: "taste the world to come" not "remake this world, where we live".

That constrictive face of Purim is the Megila, the rabbinically-required Purim performance – a mythic narrative¹ that is mandated to be read aloud in synagogues on the holiday. Whatever ornaments and interpretations are put on it, **the Esther/Mordekhai story has a genocide warrant at its heart**. Its heroes are a snitch (Mordekhai; Esther 2:22) who protects an autocrat (Ahashverosh) by getting two people who we'd now call trans² executed (Bigshan & Teresh; E2:23), and his protégée (Esther), who triumphs through a false accusation of sexual assault³ (E7:8). Its celebratory climax is the state-legitimized "preemptive" mass murder of at least 75,810 people⁴. It authorizes and justifies genocidal Zionist massacres, by individuals (like the Purim 1994 slaughter at the Ibrahimi Mosque) or the state, as we've seen throughout these years of the khurbn 'aza [destruction of Gaza], and in today's attack on Iran.

Purim performances outside rabbinic control tell other stories instead. In the Yiddish world I work in (and I believe in parallel traditions elsewhere), there are purimshpiln [Purim plays] based on the Esther/Mordechai story, and others using different rabbinically-approved mythological tales of lucky escape (Joseph; Daniel; the binding of Isaac). But the ones made by and for everyday people, outside of the synagogue or theater, are much closer to the everyday: a householder hides a smuggler from the police; a bandit gang either spares or kills a nobleman; a building contractor's scheme for success ends with his wife walled up in a bridge foundation. These purimshpiln, unlike the Megila, are not genocide warrants. They offer no fantasies of alliance with the state. They make no pretense that mass murder can be justified. Whether hilarious or horrific, they place freedom squarely in this world.

¹ There is absolutely no historical basis for anything in the Megila. Attempts to find one are constant and elaborate, but are based on nothing but theocratic fantasy.

² They are described as "sarisi/sorisey", conventionally translated "eunuchs", but more recently with the specificity of their gendering erased through a translation of the word as "chamberlains", an extrapolation based on one of the common jobs of this gendered category of people.

³ The king decides (with no objection from Esther or Mordekhai) that Haman begging Esther for mercy is an attempt to rape her. This, not the genocide plot, is what Haman is executed for (E7:9). The similarity with false accusations against black and Palestinian men is striking.

⁴ Haman's 10 sons (E9:7-11), 500 people in Shushan the first day of the slaughter (E9:6), 300 more the next day (E9:15), 75,000 people elsewhere in the empire (E9:16). None are accused of anything but being generic "enemies".

As we – antizionist queer/trans cultural workers, mainly – have revitalized purimshpil traditions over the last few decades, there has been a move to absorb purimshpiln into the Megilla. This is a continuation of earlier efforts to contain vernacular Purim practice within rabbinic constraints, and within the genocidal politics built into the rabbinic theology of chosenness⁵.

The result has been that instead of drawing on the actual repertoire and history of vernacular liberatory traditions, **most contemporary performances repeat the Esther/Mordechai story**, shifting who is allegorized into what role but **always further entrenching its logic of appeal to the state as a path to safety, and of genocide as freedom**. Let's stop doing that.

A genocide warrant cannot be interpreted away.

We can – we should – place the Megila in a geniza to decay, alongside the commandment to exterminate the Amalekites, the sanctified slaughter of the firstborn of Mitsraim, Psalm 137's call for child-murder, and the rest of the rabbinic canon's calls for genocide.

Only then we can find festivals of liberation, the feasts that we desire.

A ritual assignment for Adar, each of us looking to the specific histories of the places we live:

To prepare the feast that we desire: a festival of liberation that isn't built on others' blood.

What food, what words, fill our mouths with connection to our neighbors?

To make carnival a practice of freedom, not a pressure-release evading it.

What music, what dances, bring that connection into our bodies, our muscle-memory?

To reckon with massacres like the ones story of Esther & Mordechai has justified and enabled.

To tell a different story, so this one doesn't tell us.

What stories of shared struggle define the places we live? What betrayals of solidarity that must be remembered? How, and with who, can we best remember them? What stories are we writing now with barricades, de-arrests, and other concrete acts of resistance? Alongside who?

⁵ That theology is the enabling center of Zionism, and inseparable from Zionism's core principles: the divine landgrant justifying eternal Jewish control over Palestine (and thus the genocide of Palestinians), and diaspora as divine punishment (and thus the destruction of all diasporic Jewish cultures). But it is no less central to the Jewish "religious left" in all its forms, which clings to the idea of Jews as divinely chosen, as if interpretive gymnastics to replace the alleged aim of the sanctifying selection improves what it does in the world.