Thoughts for Purim

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By
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The Megillah pays close attention to what Mordecai wears. When he learns of the evil decree against the Jews, "Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry." Mordecai had been one of the regulars at the king's gate--but the king did not allow people dressed in sackcloth to enter the royal precincts. In her distress, Esther sent Mordecai a change of clothes, which Mordecai rejected.

Mordecai's sackcloth was a blatant symbol of sadness; and also of defiance. He wanted people to see that something was very wrong, and to be outraged by the scandalous decree of the king against the Jews. Mordecai was practicing non-violent protest; his shabby clothes were a visible alarm signal to the public at large.

Later in the story, Mordecai is rewarded for having saved the king's life. Haman is made to walk Mordecai through the streets, while Mordecai is riding the king's horse and wearing clothes that the king had worn. This must have struck the public as very odd. Mordecai--who had recently been wearing sackcloth and who was a member of a people doomed to destruction by the king--is being honored by wearing the king's own clothes! Perhaps the situation of the Jews has improved.

What was Mordecai thinking as he was shown such honor? Perhaps, he thought that he might now have greater access to the king; after having worn the king's clothes, maybe there was a possibility for him to seek an audience with the king and try to convince him to rescind the evil decree. Or perhaps Mordecai sensed that his wearing the king's clothes made the general public view the Jews with greater favor and respect, and that somehow things would turn out alright.

After Esther had successfully intervened on behalf of the Jews, Mordecai became the Grand Vizier. "And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple." From wearing sackloth, to wearing clothes borrowed from the king, Mordecai now is dressed in the lavish clothing of a top government official.

His clothing symbolizes his power in the kingdom. It reminds Jews and non-Jews that a Jewish man is second to the king.

In spite of his various garbs, Mordecai is the same person inside. He is "ish yehudi"--a Jewish man deeply committed to his people. The Megillah ends with a description of Mordecai as "seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed." This inner dignity and strength characterized Mordecai in good times and bad, regardless of the clothing he wore. His garments might be different, but he was always the same trustworthy and faithful Mordecai.

When Jews can emulate Mordecai's steadfastness of purpose, inner poise, and unshakeable commitment--then the Jewish people will be blessed with "light and happiness and joy and honor."

***The Insititute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (www.jewishideas.org) wishes you and your loved ones a happy Purim.

Angel for Shabbat