Mordecai and His Critics: Thoughts for Purim

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Who could be more successful, more beloved, more worthy of respect than Mordecai? He was a superhero who stood up for the dignity of the Jewish people, who was largely responsible for averting Haman's evil decree to annihilate the Jews, and who rose to be the king's viceroy.

He was not only successful and powerful. He also had fine moral qualities and good values. The Megillah informs us that Mordecai—in spite of his lofty position—was characterized by "seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed (Esther 10:3)." He was a warm, conscientious and thoughtful leader.

Who could possibly not like Mordecai?

Yet, the Megillah informs us that Mordecai was "great among the Jews and agreeable to most of his brethren (Esther 10:3)." Our sages noted: Mordecai was agreeable to MOST of his fellow Jews, most but not all! Mordecai had his enemies and detractors. What did these dissidents have against him?

One group may have thought: Mordecai was too "Jewish." If only he had not defied Haman, the crisis would not have happened in the first place. Mordecai should not have demonstrated his Jewishness in public. He should have tried to blend in, to stay under the radar. This group felt that Jews should camouflage their Jewishness to the extent possible. You can be Jewish at home, but not in public!

Another group may have thought: Mordecai was not Jewish enough! He was too close with the Persian powers. He dressed like a Persian viceroy and had to adopt the courtly ways of the nobles of the kingdom. Mordecai would not have had much time to study Torah or attend synagogue services. He was a "court Jew"

who had to sell out on his religiosity in order to hold his high position.

Yet others disliked Mordecai—just because they disliked anyone who had more success or prestige than they had. Such people enjoy tearing others down as a means of artificially building themselves up. What fun it is to ridicule leaders, and pick away at their real or perceived flaws. Sitting in the grandstands, small-minded people enjoy criticizing those who are out on the playing field.

Mordecai's critics exist in every generation and in every community. There are still those who think Jews should hide their Jewishness, should assimilate to the extent possible so as to blend in with the larger society. These people cringe at public demonstrations of Jewish religious or national expression. If only Jews would be invisible…

There are still those who suspect others of being not sufficiently religious or sufficiently proud of their Jewishness. They criticize those who adopt modern dress or modern thought; the modernists are branded as assimilationists, as betrayers of Torah.

And there are inevitably people who criticize…because that's what they enjoy doing. No matter how good and true their leaders are, the critics will find fault. They will pontificate and pose as sages who know far better than the leaders. They do this because of their weak egos, their need to assert their own worthiness by tearing down the worthiness of others. Although these are weak and pitiful human beings, they continue to flourish without self-reflection and without the desire to improve themselves.

So Mordecai—like almost everyone of eminence!—could not please everyone. No matter what he did or didn't do, someone would be sure to criticize and harass him.

How did Mordecai deal with his critics? The Megillah suggests that he did not pay any attention to them! On the contrary, he kept seeking peace and speaking good for the benefit of all his people—including his detractors. Mordecai was not in a popularity contest, he was not interested in appeasing this group or that group. He would not lose focus on his mission as a leader dedicated to the peace and wellbeing of his people.

Bravo Mordecai!

"For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went forth throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai waxed greater and greater (Esther 9:4)."

Angel for Shabbat