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Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of *Purim* will never cease': A practical theology of *Purim*.

Samuel Wan

Abstract

Stemming from the book of Esther is the festival of *Purim*, a celebration of mask-wearing and crossdressing frivolity. This joyous festival is commanded to never cease in the lives of G-D's people. Despite the strange and horrific origins of this festival and millennia of antisemitism and evil perpetrated towards Jewish people, this command continued to be heeded even during the Holocaust. Why is this festival so central and important to the religious lives of G-D's people? This paper proposes that the rhetorical and theological message of Esther empowers *Purim* to be a 'practical theodicy' that emboldens the faith of the people of G-D in times of suffering. Each part of the festival includes rituals that form and reform the faith of believers to trust in the hidden face of G-D despite his absence. By participating in *Purim* and *Purim*-esque actions in the midst of suffering, faithful believers reaffirm their place in the eschatological narrative of reversal, deliverance and vindication. Thus, the commanded festival and laughter will never cease because G-D's vindication is so certain that his people can celebrate as if it has come.

Key words: *Purim*, the book of Esther, Practical theology, rhetorical function, theological interpretation of Scripture, theodicy, Judaism.

samekh The earth's inhabitants opened their mouths, for Haman's
lot became our *Purim*,

ayin The righteous man was saved from the wicked's hand;
the foe was substituted for him.

rosh They understood to establish *Purim*, to rejoice in every
single year...

The blessing read after the *Megillah* at *Purim* (Gold, Bible, Targum
Sheni and Scherman 1991:133)

Introduction

There is an anonymously written poem inscribed on the lintel of a cell door in the main camp of Auschwitz: '*immer freilich sind fur... die Gnade and das Wunder unterwegs, nur sind schwer zu sehen und zu begreifen, fur die, die im dunkeln wandern müssen*' (Czarnecki 1989:11, 174). Translated in English:

*There is always certainly ... grace,
And wonder along the journey.*

*Only they are hard to see,
Hard to embrace, for
Those who in darkness are compelled to wander.¹*

We do not know who wrote this poem, whether the poet was religious or areligious, faithful or apathetic, Jewish or Christian. Despite this, grace can be hard to find in darkness; and for people of the Abrahamic faith, G-D can be hard to see in suffering. As I spent my time reading the Book of Esther and contemplating the practice of *Purim*, a festival of enjoyment and celebration that derives from Esther, the question that shaped this paper from beginning to end was this: despite millennia of antisemitism and evil perpetrated towards Jews, why does *Purim* continue to be celebrated?

Methodology

The study of the Holocaust ought not to be only a scholarly discipline because it concerns the real lives of people with hauntingly real experiences. Furthermore, the study of religious festivals is not only a study of applied theology, as practices themselves shape theology. Thus, to holistically explore the practice of *Purim* in the Holocaust requires a methodology that surveys the intersections of socio-religious liturgy, the religious texts from which they are based, the theology that undergirds practice, and the setting in which it is performed. The most conducive form of multidisciplinary enquiry for this study is the methodology of practical theology following Swinton and Mowat (2006). They explain practical theology to be ‘critical, theological reflection on the practices of [a community of faith] as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful [practices]....’ (2006:7) In order to accomplish the theological reflection, the different pieces of what constitutes religious practice are put together as a puzzle, thus allowing a greater glimpse of the reality of the world and the possibilities of faith.

In the first step, the religious activity (*Purim*) is described in a social, historical, and cultural setting (the Holocaust) and the question is raised about the purpose of this practice. Secondly, the primary religious text which undergirds the practice is analysed, in this case the Hebrew Scriptures particularly the book of Esther which we presuppose as a divinely inspired text. Because the study is a practical study, the textual analysis used is a functional and theological hermeneutic; in this analysis, historical and text-critical questions are secondary to the possible authorial intentions, and the rhetorical and theological function(s) of the text. This will be accomplished via through Speech Act Theory, according to socio-linguists Austin, Umson and Sbisa (1975:94-108), and biblical scholar Richard Briggs (2001:40-41).

Speech act theory proposes that all texts are actions or rhetorical functions; language not only communicates but acts upon the audience. The theory does so by distinguishing the three acts of any given communication:

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

1) the locution (the speech itself); 2) the illocution (the intended effect); and 3) the perlocution (the consequential effect) (Austin, Urmson and Sbisá 1975:94-108). The aim of this method to read what *is* written by assessing *how* it is written and ascertain *to what possible end* it is written. This is accomplished by reading the text and determining how literary devices and theological themes combine to drive the audience's response. Due to the scope of this paper, this section considers the primary illocution; that is, how the whole entirety of the book of Esther functions rhetorically upon the reader. (Barker 2016:85-88)

Thirdly, having determined the rhetorical function(s) of the text, I make connections between text and practice by analysing five major traditions in the festival of *Purim* in the context of suffering. Finally, as the goal of practical theology is to 'enable [future] faithful practices' (Swinton and Mowat 2006:10), this is accomplished through pastoral reflections on the implication for future faith in the lives of current faith communities.

Purim

Purim is a feast of enjoyment and celebration, where it is proclaimed that one should drink to the point where one is unable to distinguish between saying 'cursed be Haman' and 'blessed be Mordecai' (Bloch 1980:289).² In medieval times, *Purim* adopted European *carnivale* elements and evolved into the performance of carnivalesque plays,³ mask wearing and crossdressing which continues today in some Jewish communities. It is described in modern times as 'a celebration of the reversal of fortunes and is commonly known as a day of the "topsy-turvy" or often called the Jewish Mardi Gras or Hallowe'en.' (Carruthers 2008:267)

When we survey the celebration of *Purim* during the Holocaust, there is ample evidence that it continued despite looming invasions, poor conditions, deportations and labour camps. Just five months before Hitler invaded Poland, Malka Geri and Riva Spivak walked down the street with gift baskets in their hands, as is the custom of *Mishlochei Manot*; yet the impending invasion did not mark the end of *Purim*. In 1942, children dressed up as kings and queens in the Lodz ghetto in Poland, *Purim* plays were performed in a ghetto in Wielopole, and a *Purim* celebration was held in Wieliczka, Poland. After the *Shoah*, the orphanages in Belgium and displaced camps in Wels, Austria celebrated *Purim* (Yad Vashem Archives, n.d.).⁴

Crucial to the first night of *Purim* is the recitation of the *Megillah*, and during the evening of *Purim* 1943 in the Ilia concentration Camp in Transylvania, there was no *Megillah* for Jews to read. Despite the dire situation, Zvi Herschel Weiss wrote a humorous text, combining the inmate's personal stories with that of Esther (Neias 2014). Humour was what, Joseph Dorinson wrote, 'taught Jews... how to box with God... The laughter evoked helped to create a delicate balance between piety and complaint.' (Lipman 1991:135) Humour is described as 'Jewish novacaine. It is the ultimate Jewish

painkiller, a remedy much needed in World War II.’ (Lipman 1991:135) Paradoxically, the stripping away of extravagances led some to comment that they ‘eat as if it were *Yom Kippur*, sleep in *succahs*, and dress as if it were *Purim*.’ (Huberland, Gurock and Hirt 1987:115) The centrality of celebrations was commented by Yaakov Zim: ‘We had *Hanukkah* parties, *Purim* parties... we got together to strengthen our morale.’ (Ostrower 2014:329)

In 1935, in defiance of the Nazis, cars decorated as Nazi Tanks and marchers in Nazi uniforms marched in *Purim Ad Loloyada* in pre-Israel Palestine. Further defiance was seen in the Warsaw ghettos, where political commentary was disguised as *Purim* plays (*shpiel*). In one *Purimshpiel*, instead of Haman being led to the gallows, Hitler went in his place. There was a cabaret character called the ‘old Haman,’ and lyrics in a *Purim* song changed *hamantaschen* to *hitlertashen*. (Lipman 1991:134-135)

Special *Purims* are part of a Talmudic command (Ber. 54a), celebrated by communities who were miraculously saved from disasters. Following the devastating event, a *megillah* of the event would be written and read following the reading of Esther. This is a tradition recorded as early as 1200/1400 A.D., *Purim Mo’ed Katan* or *Shiraz* (celebrated on the 2nd *Heshvan*), where Jews were permitted to practice their faith after being forced to convert to Islam. The liberation of the Jews in World War Two became a special *Purim*: *Purim Hitler* (2nd of Kislev). (Shmeruk 2006:742) In 1944, Prosper Hassine, a Jewish scribe in Casablanca, wrote *Megillat Hitler*; this is a recount of the Holocaust that mimics the biblical scroll. The story of Esther continues to be repeated in the recitation of G-d’s people, in the retelling of their own history. ‘Hassine stresses... that it is not a story of joy since it does not have a happy end. He writes that the *Megillah* should be read with a serious demeanour while remembering the victims.’ (Yad Vashem, n.d.)

Despite the horrific suffering endured by many Jewish people during the Holocaust, *Purim* continued to be celebrated. Why not pause *Purim* for a moment and turn to grief and lament, instead of dressing up in ghettos, sharing gifts and performing *Purimshpiel*? And why continue to practice *Purim*, joy and frivolity even after years of separation, lengthy suffering and even when deliverance from G-D seemed impossible? Is it because Jews had faith that they celebrated *Purim* or is it because by practising *Purim* they (re)gained faith?

The *Purim* text

To understand the continuation of *Purim* in the midst of suffering communities, we must explore the theology and rhetorical intent of the book of Esther (the *Megillah*) that sets the precedence for the existence of the festival. This part of the Hebrew Scriptures tells an account of how an unsuspecting exiled Jewish orphan becomes queen of Persia, and subsequently prevents a planned genocide of the Jewish exiles. Little research

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

has been undertaken in the area of rhetorical analysis of the book of Esther; one of the earliest works by Julius Lewy suggest that the purpose of the book of Esther is to justify the existence of *Purim* (1939). This is made clear in Esther 9:28, where the Jewish community is commanded to celebrate *Purim*: 'These days [of *Purim*] *should be remembered and celebrated* by every generation... [they] *will not cease in Jewish life* and their memory will not cease in their descendants.'⁵ Thus, the primary locution for the book speaks to communities of faith to 1) remember, and 2) celebrate *Purim*. Yet, when we survey the theology and narrative of the text, remembering and celebrating *Purim* is not an end to itself; there is a further function that memory and joy produces. This paper suggests an explicit and implicit illocution of the text.

Explicit illocution

The narrative of Esther explores how despite the odds being against them (the word '*purim*' being the Hebrew word for 'lots'), G-D's people were ultimately delivered (Valoski and Heimowitz 2016: 272-273). This deliverance is particularly seen through the significant amount of plot coincidences scattered throughout the book, which suggests that something other than chance (*purim*) is at play. Did Esther just happen to be selected to go to the Harem (2:3)? Out of all the women, was only Esther favoured by the eunuch (2:9)? Why did Esther just happen to be selected as Queen out of all the other beautiful women (2:15)? Did Mordecai just happen to hear the plan for the assassination (2:21-22)? The coincidences unfolds like a Shakespearian comedy;⁵ and when we read the text as a canonical text, it would suggest that Hebrew G-D is sovereignly governing the story.

Scholars and traditional interpreters, however, disagree on the nature of G-D's intention within the narrative. Some have argued that God is present in the book in the use of the phrase 'the King' (*hamelek*) without reference to Ahasuerus (Valoski and Heimowitz 2016:9). On a metaphorical level it is plausible to symbolically interpret the approach to the throne room as approaching the Holy G-D; yet, the name Ahasuerus continues to be used until the end of the book and this interpretation has potential to tear narrative consistency. If G-D is not explicitly mentioned in the narrative, where is He?

Rabbinic sources respond with two major theories. On the one hand, both theories are committed to the divine commitment (covenant) of G-D and His people (Jos 1:9) and divine agency in world history (Ps 115:3, 135:6; Isa 45:7). On the other hand, they differ by presenting two different theodicies. The first theory interprets theodicy in a cataphatic way, linking it with retributive theology; the sufferings of G-D's people in the hands of *goyim* are the result of divine judgement of sin (Hab 1:6, Amos 9). Rabbi Ariele Rotenberg writes that Haman's potential genocide was a judgement for two

sins: Nebuchanezzar's forcing the Jews to bow before an idol (Dan 3) and the Jews participating in the banquet (Est 1; Rottenberg 1994:28-29).⁶ G-D is implicitly present with His people and active in history through His purposeful judgement by the hand of Haman. Although judgement is demonstrated in many cases in Scripture (for example Deut 31:18, 32:20 and Mic 3:4), this may be somewhat speculative and an overreach, for the Esther narrative does not direct the reader in this direction.⁷

The second rabbinic interpretation appears closer to the intention of the text; rather than equating the events as G-D's judgement, it finds G-D in His hiddenness. Rabbinic literature traced this to Deuteronomy 31:18 where G-D informs His people that 'I will surely hide [*aesetir*] my face'; interpreters saw the name of Esther appearing symbolically in the Hebrew word 'hide' (*aesetir*; Warshauer 2004). Although this intertextual use of Deuteronomy is (in my view) unconvincing, the hiddenness of G-D (*deus absconditus*) is attested in biblical literature. At times, G-D is hidden as a deliberate withholding of divine mercy (Deut 31:18, 32:20; Mic 3:4); other times, it may be because the sufferer found G-D's presence difficult to perceive (Job 13:24; Ps 10:1, 44:24, 88:14, Hab 1:1-4), in the same way that the presence of clouds and smoke covering the sunlight at noon does not negate the presence of a sun. When the book of Esther is surveyed, we cannot help but wonder whether the coincidences of the plot literarily and theologically heavily implies divine intervention. Furthermore, when we take Mordecai's advice to Esther in chapter 4:14 ('Who knows? If at this time you have the opportunity to touch (influence) this Kingdom')⁸ as a rhetorical question that alludes to G-D (Levenson 1997:81),⁹ i.e. 'Who knows?... G-D Does,' then it would appear that G-D is neither judging nor withholding mercy but has a greater purpose in His masking.

In summary, we could interpret the text as exploring two intertwining messages: the narrative message tells of G-D's deliverance of His people despite the odds; and the theological (or theodical) message informs the reader that G-D has not forsaken His people even though He has masked His face. These two messages are deeply linked with the command to remember and celebrate *Purim* because these messages are repeated and entrenched in the memory and liturgy of G-D's people. I would further argue that by repeating this message, the text's deeper purpose is to embolden faith within the reader. By causing the reader to wrestle with the unknowability of the Divine and highlighting the limits of human understanding, the book of Esther seeks to build trust, boldness, and faithful action in the very same vein as *Hadassah*. In every situation, the text proposes that G-D is present despite His hiddenness, therefore keep faith.

Implicit illocution

Not only is there a primary explicit illocution of the command of *Purim*, there appears to be an implicit illocution of the text. This implicit locution is,

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

ironically, that which is left unspoken: the absence of G-D. By leaving G-D out of the text, Fox argues that the author has pedagogically designed Esther for readers to search for G-D. In doing so, it teaches the reader a 'theology of possibility,' to search for G-D when He appears to be absent in their own lives (Fox 2001:247). The illocutionary act for readers to search for God in the text thus also teaches readers to search for God in their lives when the same unknown suffering befalls them.

In summary, the explicit narrative and theological intent of Esther is for faith communities to remember and practice *Purim*. In practicing *Purim*, they remember the text of Esther and the illocution of the text is asserted upon them:

- 1) Keep faith, for despite the odds, G-D's people were delivered; and
- 2) When G-D appears to be absent, look for Him.

The first *Purim* sets about a practical theology of memory and defiance for G-D's people in suffering. Yet, it cannot be only a celebration of memory for '[r]emembering is simply not enough. If our memories do not produce response and positive change within ourselves and the collective community, then the memory of the Holocaust... are rendered meaningless and in time will slip away.' (Frey 1989:619-620)

The traditions of Purim and their connections with Esther

Having assessed the implications of the book of Esther, we return to religious practice and make connections between theology and practice. This section theologises five central traditions of *Purim* in the context of the book of Esther and their practical effects on the community of faith in times of suffering.

The reading of the Megillah

Purim begins with the Reading of the *Megillah* on the evening of the 14th and the morning of the 15th of *Adar*. By beginning with reading the text, the festival sets the precedence for G-D's word to illocute in the lives of G-D's people. Rabbi Alshekh reflects that 'by reading the *Megillah*, the days themselves will be made... insofar as they will become eternal, acquiring substance in the spiritual sense... Even after *Purim* has passed, these days will endure, for a spiritual entity is eternal. Thus, we can say these days, for they are still with us now' (Alshekh, Rottenberg and Honig 1994:543). As the story of Esther is repeated and sunken into the collective memory of the faith community, a re-imagining of their current predicament may occur, where Esther's world becomes the possible world to re-inhabit. 'Narrative and imagery... spark new narrative and imagery, and the parabolic juxtaposing, interweaving and interlinking of material from Scripture and the contemporary world, so as to allow the former truly to address and transform perceptions of the latter.' (Wright 2003:516) By inhabiting the possible world created by the text, the explicit and implicit illocutionary acts are imposed upon the faithful reader to have faith by remembering G-D's deliverance and

looking for G-D's presence despite whatever suffering they may be experiencing. Thus, even whilst in the middle of suffering, communities of faith sought to read the *Megillah*, and if it was not available, personal *Megillahs* were rewritten, intertwining personal stories with that of Esther (Neias 2014). It appears that communities of faith saw themselves as part of the unfolding of Esther's story in their lives by celebrating special *purims* of G-D's deliverance and writing special *Megillot* to commemorate these to memory.

Crossdressing and reversals

When the world of G-D's deliverance and presence is made possible by reading, it becomes embodied in the following celebrations where Jewish imaginings and re-imaginings exploded in defiant laughter. A key feature of *Purim* is the parades of crossdressing; where men dress as women and vice versa, children dressing as rabbi, boys dressing as Esther, girls dressing as Persian soldiers. There are different interpretations for this rite, but it is suggested that crossdressing occurs because the great reversal of fates in the theological narrative of Esther overflows into the present reality of people's lives. The book of Esther is a giant chiasm of reversal, it begins with the feast of the foreign king and ends with the feast of the faithful Jews; Haman's rise is reversed by his demise, Mordecai's ash-cloth of mourning is reversed in his taking upon royal attire. What appears to be G-D's apathetic countenance in silence is revealed to be a smiling face towards His people and a judging face upon their enemies (Steinsaltz, n.d.). Esther's plan mimics G-D's mask by using a banquet (a smile) to hide her request for justice (a frown). By dressing differently and masking reality, celebrators embody the great reversal in an absurd liturgy. Furthermore, combined with crossdressing are acts of reversal: Talmud students are allowed to mock their Rabbi, gambling and intoxication were allowed (Gregory 2015:633). These liturgies appear to carry about an embodied realisation of eschatological laughter and celebration of the victory of G-D's people in suffering through a reversal of fates. If G-D will ultimately reverse fate, let us reverse it right now.

Perhaps these absurd rituals of hilarity occur because evil will not take away eternal laughter, an inheritance given to the Jewish forefather Father Isaac 'the one who laughs.' Wiesel compares Isaac to the suffering Jewish person in an interview, 'Isaac, the survivor of the Holocaust [i.e. his offering in the hands of Abraham], always remembers his father, knife in hand... and in spite of everything, was capable of laughter.' (in Bussie 2007:61) Wiesel's holocaust novel 'Gates of the Forest,' bleeds with intertextuality of Masks and humour. There is a nameless character who dons the name Gavriel, God is my strength; and Gavriel's strength lies in laughter. Gavriel says: 'I've decided once and for all not to weep, to weep is to play their game. I won't.' (Wiesel 1986:37). The main character subsequently survives every crisis moment by becoming Gavriel, emptying himself and wearing the mask of

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

Gavriel's laughter. The 'Nazi objective was to dehumanize Jews to the point where they had internalized dehumanisation' Bussie writes '[but] with laughter, he [Gavriel] jettisons the despair, tears and self-loathing that the Nazis try relentlessly to inflict on him' (Bussie 2007:37). Laughter is 'a refusal to bend to oppressive will,' (Bussie 2007:39) the 'Jewish novocaine... a remedy much needed in World War II' (Lipman 1991:135).

Hamantaschen

Part of celebration for *Purim* is in remembrance of the overthrowing of the enemy of the Jews. In the book of Esther, Haman, a descendant of the ancient enemies of Israel, the Amalekites, is defeated; thus, the tradition of *Hamantaschen* (Yiddish for Haman's ears) is eaten by the Jews. There are a myriad of Midrashic explanations developed over centuries for the origins of this simple treat, including the Talmud explaining that poppy seeds (the filling of *hamantaschen*) were the only food that Esther ate during her time in the haram to keep kosher (Tractate Megillah 13a); Rabbi Moses Alrich suggests that Mordecai sent secret messages to Jews during the time in pastries; Rabbi Yisrael Isserlin interprets the sweetness hidden within the pastry symbolising the hidden redemption of G-D; and the three cornered pastry pointing to the three cornered hat that Haman wore, but also the weakening of Haman when he recognised Mordecai's forefathers were Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Est 6:12-13). (Shurpin, n.d.) Overall, regardless of the difference in interpretations, the central theme of the snack appears to be the comical demise of one of Israel's greatest enemies; Haman, the one who laughed at the Jews' potential demise would be remembered forever in the demeaning frivolity of being eaten as a poppyseed pastries. G-D's enemies, no matter how tremendous and frightful, will meet a humiliating end, for 'he who sits in heaven laughs' (Ps 2:4 RSV). In a similar vein, a *Purim* joke was told in World War Two of a Jewish boy who sat on the front row during Hitler's speech. When questioned by Hitler himself on why he was smiling during the speech the boy 'shook his head ... smiled,' and replied... 'to remember Haman... [we] eat *hamantashen*. I wonder what holiday we will celebrate, and what we will eat after your exit.' (Lipman 1991:134-135)

Mischloach manot

If victory has come, then freedom, grace and gifts can be embraced. As the Nazis sought to destroy the humanity, freedom and faith of the Jews, they were defiant by practising *mischloach manot* – the *Purim* gifting of food. Five months before Hitler invaded Poland, Malka Geri and Riva Spivak walked down the street with *mishlochei manot*; Victor Frankl described men in death camps giving away their own pieces of bread in the very spirit of *mischloach manot*. In reflection, Frankl reflects that

[t]hey may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom; which determined whether or not you would become the plaything of circumstance, renouncing freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate. (Frankl 1986:86)

Mask wearing

The final ritual discussed is one of the strangest but, perhaps, most theologically important: the practice of mask wearing. Mercer-Paldon, scholar of literary masks, observes that in rites of reading, the mask donned by the implied reader becomes the mask imposed upon those in the act of reading (Melcer-Padon 2018:14). Perhaps, as per practical theologian Mercer-Padon's analogy, the narrative, theological, and ethical masks of the Book of Esther by some liturgical interpretation became the practice of wearing masks. Firstly, to wear a mask is to embody the narrative of Esther; there is a carnivalesque aspect in mask wearing that may symbolically be linked with the carnivalesque narrative with hidden intentions, reversal of tropes, roles and a 'comedic' plot (Craig 1995). Secondly, the ritual thematically ties with the implicit illocution of the book of Esther, which compels readers to find G-D in his maskedness. To wear a mask is to embody the theodicy of Esther where G-D is hidden deliberately. Rabbi Steinsaltz wrote,

[t]his Divine hiding of the Face, this Godly mask, is the very heart of the festival of Purim... [in the tribulation of Esther] every Jew must have surely felt that the Divine Face was one of fury, that this might indeed be the end of the Jewish nation. However, at the end of the story, this hiding of the face was no more than a mask. Once removed, it revealed a smiling countenance. The Purim story, then, is a kind of game; in the beginning one sees a frowning face, but eventually one sees that it is nothing but a mask. The terrifying threat not only vanishes, it turns into joy and salvation. Since Purim is a festival of the hiding of the Face, it ought to be celebrated by wearing costumes and masks. In this way we express the essence of Purim as a festival marked, from beginning to end, by concealing and revelation. (Steinsaltz 2018a)

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

Thirdly, masking symbolises the ethics of the mask donned by Esther for survival. *Hadassah* dons the mask of Esther, her ethnicity is shrouded, her actions are veiled in order to escape possible doom. Even though at the end of the narrative Mordecai becomes the 'great one' (*gadol*) Esther remains the main protagonist and instigator of action. Interestingly, the ethics of masking for the purpose of survival continues to be a theme in depictions of Jewish suffering. For example, the graphic novel *MAUS* masks the experience of World War Two in an anthropomorphic cat and mice chase and subverts the propaganda tropes used by Hitler of depicting Jewish people as rats (Spiegelman 1997). The characters of 'The gates of the forest,' by Elie Wiesel are shrouded in masks. Gregor, the protagonist, meets a nameless Hasidic Jew who is masked by a name given to him by Gregor: Gavriel. Gavriel masks the sorrow of the Holocaust with laughter. To survive, Gregor adopts a disguise, or a metaphorical mask, of a mute boy, and in order to spy for the Jewish resistance he puts on a disguise/mask of a lover (Wiesel 1986). The academy award winning film *Life is Beautiful* (although not Jewish), depicts the father disguising/ casting a mask over the entire experience of the death camp for his son as a game (Benigni 1997).

In the personal experience of Holocaust survivors, masks are worn in order to survive. I spoke with Mark Spiegelman a Holocaust survivor and cousin of Art Spiegelman the author of *MAUS*. He believes he survived because he had blue eyes, blond hair and his parents dressed him in a skirt and passed him off as a girl to avoid circumcision checks. When scavenging for food in Poland, he and his mother hid in plain sight by bleaching her hair and speaking in *Hochdeutsch*. She masked herself as German, by chatting with Nazi officers and sitting with them in the German section of the tram. One time, whilst being beaten by Polish police at a checkpoint for having no identity papers, his blue eyes and blond hair saved them both from going to Auschwitz and certain death, because the German officer saw him and let them go because Mark reminded the man of his darling girl at home whom he missed so much. (Spiegelman 2008:50, 56; Spiegelman 2019) By a mixture of natural hereditary fortune and parental ingenuity, masking became the survival technique for Mark and his family, without which his stories would not have continued. Is it possible that the ethics of mask-wearing for the purpose of survival, embedded in the ritual of *Purim* became a practical theology for communities of faith to use in times of suffering?

Practical reflections

Although I have attempted to engage with the theology of the practice of *Purim*, much remains strange and mysterious. To the outside world, the practice of laughter, joy, celebration in the midst of suffering appears to be nonsensical; however, that may exactly be the point of this festival in the lives of communities of faith. Rabbi Steinsaltz writes that *Purim* is

a time in which nothing is revealed. Some of it is masked, and some is crazy. God is speaking to us in a different language, and the only way of understanding this language is by letting go of ourselves and the conceit that we control our lives through rational, well-thought-out plans. He is telling us that there are things that we will never understand, certainly not when we are completely sane and coherent. There are things that we may begin to understand only when we lose our self-consciousness. (Steinsaltz n.d. b)

This is where the Jewish faith critiques my own Christian faith and practice. In an academia that is influenced by modernism, and theology influenced by systematic theology, the question of suffering (theodicy) tends to be philosophised. This filters down to seminaries and faith communities with the assumption that knowledge of answers leads to faith. On the other hand, the Jewish faith allows questions, doubt and wrestling with faith that leads to rituals that embolden faith.¹⁰ When it comes to the question of the co-existence of G-d and evil, or theodicy, a person's desire to know the *reason* for suffering might assure us that there is *meaning* or a *solution* to suffering – or that we do not suffer purposelessly or endlessly. But in many cases, the *reasons* for suffering are unknowable because the intentions of G-D are unsearchable. Even, at times, when the *reason* for suffering is known, it does not ease the pain of suffering. Systematising theology, gaining knowledge, does not help endurance in suffering.

Yet, when we consider the text of Esther and the festival of *Purim*, they don't provide the answers to suffering, for in *Purim* 'we are celebrating a time in which nothing is revealed... [we must let] go of ourselves and the conceit that we control our lives through rational, well-thought-out plans [to understand G-D].' (Steinsaltz n.d. b) The book of Esther shows readers the unknowability of the Divine, the limits of human understanding and the correct posture to participate in suffering. These postures are not ones of understanding suffering, but defying suffering by emboldening faith. The very rituals of *Purim* discussed above, can all be seen as actions that embolden faith: To remember in reading; to celebrate victory by eating *hamantaschen*; to laugh and celebrate in cross dressing; to eat and drink merrily in *mischloach manot*; and to wear masks in survival. In suffering, what G-D provides through *Purim* is a divine device to resist the presence of evil. These postures are what John Swinton describes as practical theodicy. For Swinton, the task of faith in suffering is not to explain evil, but to resist evil; because the task of Evil is to destroy faith (Swinton 2007:55). 'The goal and endpoint of practical theodicy is the enabling of the [faith] community to live faithfully *despite* the presence of evil... its goal is not simply the alleviation of suffering... but the restoration of divine-human relationships, that is, deliverance from the effects of what evil *does*.' (Swinton 2007:85 italics added)

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

Esther provides a divine device to face a '*barbarisch Welt*,' by commanding the people of G-D to celebrate the festival of a past victory, regardless of whether or not a current victory will occur, because there is an eternal *Purim*. It is interesting that the Talmud expounds, '...[A]ll of the holidays are to be nullified in the future but the days of *Purim* will not be nullified' (Midrash Mishlei 9:2).¹¹ Debelak writes, 'one day all the Jewish feasts will cease, but *Purim* is eternal (celebrating everlasting deliverance in the reversing of life's tragedies)' (Debelak 2014:75). *Purim* over-realises the eschatological promise of G-D's great reversal of deliverance for His people into a festival filled with rituals that embeds the eschaton of victory, peace and justice within their living memories. Faithful communities are called to live in the eschatological realities of the prophet Isaiah,

*For behold, I create new heavens
and a new earth;
and the former things shall not be remembered
or come into mind.
But be glad and rejoice for ever
in that which I create;
for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing,
and her people a joy...
no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping
and the cry of distress.
No more shall there be in it
an infant that lives but a few days,
or an old man who does not fill out his days... (Isa 65:17-20a)*

and the prophet Zephaniah,
*Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter of Jerusalem!
...he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.
I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth. (Zeph 3:14, 17c-19)*

Every time *Purim* comes around on the 13th-14th of *Adar*, faithful communities throw themselves into defiant laughter despite their current

predicament. Death, evil and G-D's enemies are defied in *Purim* because they do not have the ultimate laughter, for none of those things can rip away the laughter of G-D. Because of this, even when there does not seem to be light at the end of the tunnel, *Purim* allows the faithful to see and inhabit the possibility of hope and celebrate victory with a mask of joy because of the eschatological certainty of the great *Purim* of G-D: a reversal of eternal fate. Reading and reimagining the *Megillah* becomes a way in which faith communities become present in G-D's narrative; crossdressing and frivolity becomes a way of bringing eschatological joy into the present; eating *hamantaschen* becomes a way where future victory is tasted now; giving gifts in *mischloach manot* is an overflow of eternal blessings that can never be removed; and wearing masks of joy or disguise becomes a way in which G-D's people to defy evil and maintain faith.

In the two short days of *Purim*, faith communities are lifted out of their present situations and told to imagine and inhabit the *Shalom* of the eschaton and laugh at evil – because evil will never have the final laugh. Living lives like the Psalmist as if G-D has already

... restored the fortunes of [the eschatological] Zion,
we were like those who dream.

Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy... (Ps 126:1-2)

Laughter and celebration in the face of ridiculous odds is the practical theodicy that looks illogical and mad to the eyes of the outside world, but without which, faith will not survive. Wiesel writes: 'Who is a Jew? A Jew is he – or she – whose song cannot be muted... [whose] joy [cannot] be killed by the enemy, ever' (Bussie 2007:56).

Conclusion – the last laugh

Comedy is often said to be tragedy plus time. Celebration occurs for the faithful community because evil will not take away eternal laughter, an inheritance given first to their Father Isaac, 'the one who laughs.' The divine comedy of Esther plays itself over and over again in the People of G-d, as they celebrate *Purim*. I asked Mark about the use of masks in the Holocaust and he replied: 'Without it I wouldn't be talking to you... I would be a puff of smoke in Auschwitz' (Spigelman 2019b). The eternal nature of *Purim* gives G-D's people power because there is certainty that the celebration of deliverance *will* come, people of faith can celebrate as if it has come. That is the power of *Purim*. Those days of the Holocaust will cease, but these days of *Purim* will never cease. The laughter of festivals and Gavriel will not fade, because even when all festivals will cease *Purim* will not, because *Purim* is eternal.

Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

Endnotes

¹ My translation with help from the German Senior's group of *Martin Luther Kirche*.

² Although whether that is literal or to be taken literally is debated, the laws of *Megillah* 2:15 writes: 'One should eat meat and prepare as nice a meal as one can afford and drink wine until one becomes drunk and falls asleep from drunkenness.' Bloch suggests a literal interpretation because 'the comforting story of *Purim* will never completely lift the burden of Jewish anxieties. The only way to forget past and current tyrants is to numb one's awareness of their existence with a bit of liquor... He hoped that there would be at least one day in the year when Jews would not be conscious of the need to curse Haman' (Bloch 1980:290).

³ 'In European countries, where a carnival with parades, pantomimes, and masquerades took place at about the same season of the year, the celebration of *Purim* was influenced by the customs of the environment. Consequently, on this day plays were produced representing scenes from the events related in the *Megillah*, and at times also from other biblical stories. The amateur players were known as *Purim Shpielers*.' (Waxman 1958:74)

⁴ See Yad Vashem's Exhibition at <https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/exhibitions/purim/index.asp>

⁵ Author's translation with emphasis added.

⁶ See also Valoski and Heimowitz (2016:8).

⁷ He therefore suggested that there are two redeemers, Mordecai vanquishing Haman, and Esther reigning as queen. Likewise, Rotenberg suggests the presence of two mitzvahs in *Purim*, 1) the reading of the *Megillah* sanctifies God's name in public thus overturns the sin of idol worship; and 2) the banquet of *Purim*, of happiness and feasting, overturns the partaking of the King's feast. (Rotenberg 1994:28-29)

⁸ Cf. According to the Tractate *Megillah*, when asked why all the Jews in Persia were sought to be punished, Rabbi Simon replied that the Jews only pretended to worship Nebuchadnezzar and G-D only pretended to afflict them. See, *b.Meg.12a*. Rabbi Steinsaltz saw that Jews must have seen G-D as having a face of fury at Haman's decree, who then removed his mask, 'revealing a smiling countenance.' There is a complex question of agency in Steinsaltz's thoughts: is it G-D who deliberately allows his face to be mistaken as a face of anger (thus he divinely masks himself)? Or is it His people who have mistakenly placed a mask of anger upon G-D? These are equally the complex theodicean questions asked in the Holocaust. (Steinsaltz n.d. b)

⁹ Author's translation.

¹⁰ Levenson notes that a theological reading is suggestive here, *mî yôdēa* 'being used in Scripture as a reference to G-D (2Sam 12:22; Joel 2:14; and Jonah 3:9). (Levenson 1997:81)

¹¹ 'To be Jewish is to ask questions. Our Talmud, by insisting we question, allows us to doubt.' (Bronfman 2013)

¹² Wertheim writes that *Purim* is of greater importance than *Yom Kippur* and *Hanukkah*. In *Yom Kippur* atonement was made for the sin of the golden calf, a feast of idolatry, but in *Purim*, salvation came through fasting, hence there occurs a celebratory feast for atonement. In *Hanukkah* the use of Dreidels, spun from above, shows that repentance at *Hanukkah* is incomplete (from above) whereas in *Purim*, the spinning of *graggers*, which are spun from below, symbolises that repentance is complete because it is from below (in sackcloth and ashes). (Wertheim 1992:290; Megailat Taanit, Chapter 12; Bloch 1980:284).

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Those days of Holocaust will cease but 'these days of Purim will never cease'

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