

The Story of Esther in the Jewish Scriptures holds fond memories for me.
The scripture is directly tied into the Jewish Holiday of Purim, which is a celebratory holiday.
As a child raised in Judaism,
I remember every year we would have a Purim Pageant, where we would dress up in costumes
and retell the story of Esther and use noisemakers.
It was the most enjoyable memory of Temple that I have.

So the quick overview of the story
is that the King is looking for a new queen.
He chooses Esther who is Jewish although he does not know this.
Separately, Esther's Uncle Mordechai
a wise and religious Jew first foils a plot to overthrow the King
and then in a separate incident refuses to bow to the King's right hand man Haman the Agagite.
Because of this Haman plots to exterminate all the Jews in the land.
Esther despite her fear of being killed by the King
just for asking for a presence with him,
and as well for exposing herself as a Jew
finds the courage to confront the King
and persuades him not only to cancel the edict to kill the Jews which she requested,
but then the King gives an order to kill Haman and all his family as well.

So there are so many interesting parts to this scripture. First, as an aside, it is the only book in
the entire Jewish Scriptures that does not mention God even once.
Most academics agree it is not a historical book
as much as a novella to explain the celebration of the holiday Purim.
As I studied the story, I realized that the story I was told as a child was incomplete.
That happens with storytelling, or even sermons sometimes. There isn't always enough time to
give the whole story in full detail....
It reminds me of the old Paul Harvey radio show when he would say "and now you know the rest
of the story".

So now for the rest of the story
The Story of Esther has more recently been promoted
as a feminist story of how Esther saved the Jews.
However, I want us to remember another feminist in the story
at the beginning of the story which I was never told when I was young,
which is why the King was looking for a new queen in the first place.
The King and his entourage were having a drunk fest.
It states in ch1 verse 7
"Royal wine was served in abundance...and the rule for the drinking was "No
Restrictions"
This drinking went on for a week according to the story.
So I understand maybe why they didn't want me to hear this part when I was young.

After a week of drinking the King called for Queen Vashti to come and to walk naked among all
his guests. She refused. Her outcome in the story is uncertain,

she is at the very least banished from the Kingdom or at worst killed.
To me, Vashti is also a feminist hero of this book.
Knowing her eventual negative outcome,
she invokes her will and refused to allow a man to control her actions and her body.
And although it is the book of Esther, we should never forget Vashti,
and the ongoing need for us to hold up a light to our culture that consistently objectifies women.
Vashti is a character that says no, I will not accept this.

The Book of Esther is also the story of Esther,
who overcomes fear, accepts her destiny, risks everything, and ultimately saves her people.
Esther faces real danger in confronting the King as it says in Chap 3 v 11
 “if any person man or woman, enters the kings presence without having been summoned,
 there is but one law for them, that they be put to death. Esther says, “If am to perish I
 shall perish”
and so although not summoned went to the King and spoke her truth.

What would move you to speak to power to fight injustice, not only for yourself but for others.
And secondly I ask you to think of time when when you felt powerless and someone else spoke
up for you or your concerns.
And lastly think of a time you felt silenced in the face of power.
What gives one the courage to speak up, and to risk all.
Perhaps this story can you give you the courage to speak up to right a wrong,
or to bring light to an injustice.

And although too complex to tell the whole story now, Esther uses guile, cunning and her
sexuality to invoke her will and obtain the hoped for outcome to save her people. Yet throughout
her ordeal she is still subject to the whim of men.

Famous Woman’s Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote in 1898
"Women as queenly, as noble and as self-sacrificing as was Esther, as self-respecting and as
brave as was Vashti, are hampered in their creative office by the unjust statutes of men; but God
is marching on; and it is the seed of woman which is to bruise the head of the serpent.

It is not man’s boasted superiority of intellect through which the eternally working Divine power
will perfect the (human) race, but the receptiveness and the love of woman."

So on the one hand, the story of Esther is the story of a religious minority in a foreign land being
oppressed.

It seems like a clear cut story of good versus evil. But nothing is ever really clear cut.
For this story is also the story of an ancient blood feud between the Hebrews and the Amalekites
going back to the beginnings of the Bible.
Some academics argue the Amalekites are the descendants of Esau from the book of genesis.
Throughout the Jewish Scriptures the Amalekites and the Hebrews fight each other.
And at the end of the book of Esther,
the Hebrews were given permission to slaughter Haman’s family and their followers the
descendants of the Amalekites. And it is this same type of blood feud that has haunted humanity

for our history, whether it was the Protestants and the Catholics , the Hatfields and Mccoys or the current conflict in the middle east.

These are the stories we write and pass down from generation to generation.

It is time to write a new story.

Recently in our country we have started hearing more and more hate speech, particularly against immigrants who are attempting to come to America to escape poverty and violence.

We hear hate speech against transgender individuals.

In fact we hear hate speech almost every day from the leaders of this country.

What is it people fear.

It saddens me that every week in my community the Islamic Center and Jewish temples feel they have to hire off duty police to protect themselves.

Every day my wife Jan and I would record the news to watch and talk about during our dinner together.

Almost every story has something to raise one's fear.

From terrorist attacks, to killer storms, to construction on a local bridge.

So what do we do to inoculate ourselves.

We can turn off the news. We can become uniformed.

But that only works for so long.

Eventually you will have to cross that bridge, or realize a storm is upon you.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said,

“Knowledge is the antidote to fear, – Knowledge, Use and Reason, with its higher aids. The child is as much in danger from a staircase, or the fire-grate, or a bath-tub, or a cat, as the soldier from a cannon or an ambush. Each surmounts the fear as fast as he precisely understands the peril and learns the means of resistance. Each is liable to panic, which is, exactly, the terror of ignorance surrendered to the imagination. Knowledge is the encourager, knowledge that takes fear out of the heart, They can conquer who believe they can. It is one who has done the deed once who does not shrink from attempting it again....The sailor loses fear as fast as they acquire command of sails and spars and steam ;”

I am not sure what a spar is, but I get the point.

There are things to fear, but let us make sure we fear and prepare for the right things, and not fear everything.

Let us be informed. But just being informed is not enough.

Emerson tells us we need to act, to do the deed.

To build our memory muscle of courage.

Let us take actions that help combat each others fears.

Let us practice the way of peace.

Let us practice the way of compassion,

Let us practice the way of forgiveness.

Let us do this individually, as congregations, as communities, and as a nation.

Imagine what the world would be like if we could stop the cycle of violence. If we could live without fear.

It is why I believe interfaith work and intercultural competency is so important.

Eboo Patel wrote

“a spiritual principle is that human beings were meant to be diverse, and they were meant to live together.”

I think we try to embody that in our values, principles and our plurality. We know we are meant to be diverse because it is so obvious we are diverse.

But the important thing is to know that we are meant to live together. And it makes sense.

We can choose to be fragmented or we can choose to be whole.

We as Unitarian Universalists choose to be whole, to be one.

Patel goes on to say

“On the one side of the faith line are the religious totalitarians. Their conviction is that only one interpretation of one religion is a legitimate way of being, believing, and belonging on earth.

Everyone else needs to be cowed or converted, or condemned, or killed.

On the other side of the faith line are the religious pluralists, who hold that people believing in different creeds and belonging to different communities need to learn to live together.

Religious pluralism is neither mere coexistence nor forced consensus.

It is a form of proactive cooperation that affirms the identity of the constituent communities while emphasizing that the well being of each and all depends of the health of the whole.”

Too often all we hear are the words of the religious totalitarians.

It is why we must speak up and must reach out and speak out.

It is why we must share our views with others, so they know they are not alone.

So they know there is a religion that speaks for inclusiveness and peace and love.

If we stay silent and if we stay small then the only voice that will be heard will be that of the religious totalitarians.

So I invite you to come together with others in your community.

People from other religions, other backgrounds, other cultures.

The Shams of Tabriz wrote

“Someone who doesn’t make flowers makes thorns.

If you’re not building rooms where wisdom can be openly spoken you’re building a prison.”

Ours is a religion built on free religious thought.

Let us build our world that way as well

May it be so.