

## Let's Hyphenate

A reflection by Rev. Jackie Clement  
 Delivered at the First Parish Universalist, Malden, MA  
 March 15, 2009

Purim is a happy holiday. A *really* happy holiday. It's a story of redemption and playing tricks, too much partying and most of all a story of reversals as what seemed to be true gets flipped upside down. The biblical Book of Esther in which the story is told is also a pretty unusual book in several ways, including the fact that it is the only book in the Hebrew Bible that never mentions God.

The Book of Esther was a story written for Jews in the Diaspora, Jews forced to live away from Judea, first captured by the Babylonians, and then as vassals of Persia. It was meant to tell them that although the Temple is destroyed and they are exiled from their land, they can still live a faithful and triumphant life in whatever context they find themselves. And despite its rather stiff court language, including a somewhat tedious description of the Persian postal system, it reads like romance novel with the beautiful, young heroine, the evil villain, the avuncular guiding figure and plenty of misunderstandings. Unlike other parts of the Bible, it did not come from the oral tradition but was written specifically as a work of historical fiction and meant to be read. In fact the only rabbinical requirement for Purim is to publicly read the entire scroll or, in Hebrew, the megillah of Esther. Ever wonder where the expression "the whole megillah" came from?

There's no doubt that the Book of Esther and the story of Purim is one of hope and triumph of an oppressed people, but it also has a much darker side. It is a story about keeping secrets. There are hidden plots of royal assassination and court intrigue, Esther hides her Jewish identity and her real name. In fact, her adopted name, Esther, means "secret" or "concealed." It is a story about plotting and political intrigues at court, and about a people held subject to a rather foolish foreign king. And, at its heart, it is a story about racial hatred, attempted genocide and ultimate slaughter. Haman plots to exterminate the Jews simply because they are Jews. That is clearly the point the story turns on, but the part less well acknowledged is that Haman's racial hatred is returned. He is not hated simply for his evil deeds, but because he is Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite. The Agagites, like the Hittites and Amalekites and others, were traditional enemies of the Jews. So Haman, too, is hated for his ancestry. And following the exposure of Haman's treachery not only is he hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai, but all ten of his sons and 75,000 others are put to death. "And on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness" (Esther 9.17).

It was a different time and world, and in the face of the six million Jews killed during World War II this carping at the death of 75,000 sounds like the weakest form of self-justification. But the fact remains that this story continues to say that to the victor comes the right to exterminate the loser. It pits tribe against tribe, blood against blood. Babylon, modern day Iraq, conquers the Jewish homeland and exiles the Jews. Persia, modern day

Iran, conquers Babylonia and slays their people. The Jews win political power and slay the Persians. It sounds all too familiar, doesn't it? Though it is set in the third century BCE the Book of Esther describes fights still being played out today.

And as we have seen clearly for eight years now, it is not a fight confined to the other side of the world, but it involves us all. And we have our own history right here in this country of the same story played out over and over again of the other—the different race, the different ethnicity, the stranger—being made to pay the price for their otherness.

Our national ancestors herded Native Americans onto reservations and stole their children in order to “civilize” them. Our national ancestors enslaved the people of another continent and brought them to work the lands stolen from the native peoples. There is a long list of immigrants that have faced harsh discrimination, from Irish to Italian to Chinese, German and Japanese. They form a broad line all the way up to the current social demons: Latinos and Arabs. We need not, indeed could not, detail the horrifying history each group faced and still faces.

Despite Andrei Codrescu's optimism that we have mainstreamed the idea of hybridization and that we have all hyphenated our way into acceptance, I don't think that is true. Certainly there has been progress, but anyone who thinks that racial hatred and ethnic discrimination doesn't exist in this country hasn't read the papers lately. Even within our UU churches I have heard racial and ethnic statements that have stopped me in my tracks. No, I don't think the fight for acceptance and equality is at all something of the past. It is now that we need to do the work, as much as in Esther's day or in 1919.

If Jewish history teaches us anything it should be the lesson that when times get tough the outsider is the one to be blamed and to be persecuted. When the bubonic plague breaks out all the Jews must be slaughtered since obviously it's their fault. We were fine until they showed up. When the economy tanks we have to eject all the immigrants since they are only here to steal our jobs and live off the welfare system. And therein is the very poison of racism, or any other sort of -ism,—the belief in superior claim by reason of superior birth. The belief that geography or language or food preferences makes you lazy, indolent, stupid or criminal. The belief that a claim to basic human rights is grounded in your birthplace.

As in the Book of Esther, there is not just one side of the story of the United States. America has an awful lot to be proud of, as well. I think Codrescu may be a little overly optimistic but I don't think he is wrong. To be American is to be a hybrid, as a society if not as an individual. Israel Zangwill said America was the great melting pot. He wrote:

America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming... Germans and Frenchmen, Irishmen and Englishmen, Jews and Russians - into the Crucible with you all! God is making the American.

I don't think he hit the metaphor just right, but I applaud the sentiment. My own metaphor of choice would be the great stew pot, where you are part of the whole flavor yet retain your identity as carrot or bay leaf. That's what that hyphenation thing is all about. It is about rejecting the idea of a purity so strong that it leads to genocide. It is a rejection of the idea that you need lose all sense of identity in order to be accepted here. Linguistically clunky as that hyphen may be, it seems to me to strike that balance between the nonexistence of the outsider and the nonexistence of disappearing into the homogeneous mass.

Unitarian Universalists know something about hybridization. We are a denomination of denominations, ironically the only denomination that requires no common theological belief yet the only denomination named for a theology, in fact two theologies. We are, as much as the American social makeup, sprung from the founding ideals of this country, and characterized by free-thinking and religious tolerance. We identify as Christian and Jew, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Humanist, atheist, agnostic, deist, Pagan, and still seeking. Not all of us even identify as Unitarian Universalist. And that is just fine with us because we require no conformity to beliefs, only a covenanting to seek together responsibly.

Yet we still struggle with the idea of inclusion and exclusion. If you read the UU journals and blogs with any regularity you will see the strains of argument that the Christians feel diminished by the Humanists who feel marginalized a new strengthening of spirituality in the movement. We do our best to get along and accept, but we know it's not always easy, and we fear the dynamic that says that the winner gets to exterminate the loser.

One of the things I have noticed is that, because we lay such store in the use of reason and individual conscience, there are many Unitarian Universalists who want to define Unitarian Universalism rather than letting it define them. This religion, any religion, is about transformation, that is, allowing your faith to transform you. I wasn't a UU for very long before the first time I heard someone say, "If you don't do what I want then I'm not going to pledge." Acceptance, diversity, tolerance and respect for the individual is not about holding the community hostage to your demands for how it should be, but about cooperation, about give and take, and sometimes compromise. It's sort of about hyphenating, about being a part of a larger whole, learning how to be a carrot yet fully give yourself to the stew.

May it be ours to know that here there need be no winners and losers. That we are here to change a past where some came out on top and others got written out of history. That we are here to remember that we are all one. So let us celebrate Purim with all the raucous joy of the oppressed released from bondage, but temper it with the knowledge that we, too, have been the oppressor. Let us celebrate Purim with all the strength of memory that makes fresh the triumphs of the downtrodden, but with the strength of conviction that keeps us from treading on others.

Namaste. Por lo tanto, puede ser.