

Purim and Pesach: Be happy, it's . . . Adar?

There is a children's song that quotes a line from Masechet Taanit 29a, "*Mishenichnas Adar marbim b'simcha.*" When (the months of) Adar begins, we increase rejoicing." Adar, the month of Purim, is considered the most auspicious time for the Jewish people, doubtless connected to the lucky reversal of fortunes that the Jews experienced in the Purim story that we read in Esther.

Nonetheless, the Joy of Purim is not complete. We do not recite Hallel (psalms of praise) on Purim, unlike the festivals, Rosh Chodesh and even Hanukkah. One of the possible reasons for its omission on Purim is that Hallel includes the line, "Give praise, you who serve God!" Even at the end of the Purim story, teaches Masechet Arakhin 10b "we are still the servants of Ahasuerus," which is to say that despite prevailing, the Jewish people still had a very uncertain future, in exile at the whim of a fickle king.

On Passover, the liberation is as complete as it has ever been in Jewish memory. That is why we invoke the liberation from Egypt in our liturgy multiple times a day, and why we mention it as part of our blessings on Shabbat and holidays.

But that complete liberation is sadly hard to come by in our general lived experience. More often, we experience incomplete joy: joy despite suffering, despite war, despite the illness and death of our loved ones, despite tremendous moral dilemma and complication.

We can and should hold a vision of complete liberation, for ourselves and the world. But I think it's telling that Nisan, the month of Passover, isn't the month in which we are instructed to increase rejoicing. Because we are not supposed to seek joy only in the memory of the miraculous salvation from Egypt (indeed, perhaps the Talmudic rabbis took it for granted that Pesach would be a joyful time).

When Adar comes, we increase rejoicing, despite how complicated and how violent the triumph of Purim is, and not because we should ignore that. But because our lives are complicated, and our present is full of violence, and we don't wait for completeness to choose joy. As my mentor, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum teaches, "Joy is an act of spiritual and political resistance." And if not now, when?