

Should Liberal Jews Celebrate Purim: YES OR NO?

Rabbi Harry Jacobi

The founders of Liberal Judaism, Claude Montefiore, Israel Mattuck and Lily Montagu, never observed Purim and John Rayner was also not in favour. Why not? He wrote: "The Feast of Purim has long been a *bête noire* in Liberal Judaism. It has been described as unhistorical, irreligious and unethical." (Pointer, March 1979) "It is a book" wrote Rabbi Alexandra Wright in 2006 "about excess: a drunken king, a power-hungry second in command, a genocidal edict and then when the tables turn, a Jewish population who go through the provinces of Persia slaughtering their enemies in revenge for what Haman had wanted to do to them. It is hardly an edifying or comfortable story." My first congregation in Southgate voted in 1962 by an overwhelming majority not to observe Purim.

Today all our congregations observe Purim with great enthusiasm, fancy-dress, plays and sketches on the story, but with an abbreviated reading of the Megillah. Abbreviated because the ending has the horrible story of the Jews slaying seventy-five thousand of those who hated them (Esther 9,10) and also as the reading of the whole Megillah takes at least one hour.

Purim also has some positive aspects. Mordechai commanded the Jews to fulfil the Mitzvah of "gemilut chasadim" to send choice portions to one another and gifts to the poor. (Esther, 9,20). Hayyim Schauss wrote in 1938 with an eye to events unfolding in Germany: "The book of Esther is more truthful than many really truthful books. For the story in the book of Esther happened a countless number of times and keeps on happening to this very day." (The Jewish Festivals, p.238)

Will we continue to have a love-hate relationship with Purim?