

Cheering Esther

Learning about another's religious tradition is always enlightening. However when it comes to Catholics learning more about Judaism, the blessings are magnified indeed. Such are the profound links between the two religions. As John Paul II put it, "*The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain manner, it is 'intrinsic' to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with it which we do not have with any other religion*" (Synagogue of Rome, 1986).

This certainly rings true in my own faith experience as a Catholic. Since I began paying attention to the Jewish liturgical calendar I have been led to parts of my own Christian bible which previously escaped my attention. Take, for example, the recent celebration of the Jewish festival of Purim (20 March 2011). Purim celebrates an event of deliverance-from-evil told in the Book of Esther. It is the story of how the beautiful Queen Esther, herself a Jew, saved her people in Persia from a massacre at the hands of a villain named Haman. It is a melodramatic tale of 'goodies' and 'baddies'—and the 'goodies' win!

Purim is a fun-filled victory celebration. The rejoicing of Jewish communities has a carnival atmosphere: costumes, masquerades, plays, parodies and plenty of wine! Food baskets given as gifts for friends and for the poor are also part of Purim activities. However the primary commandment related to Purim is to hear the reading of the Book of Esther ('the Megillah'). It is customary to boo, hiss and make loud noises at the mention of Haman's name, 'to blot out the name of Haman.'

Of course, for Catholics the Book of Esther appears in our bible too and we read from it as part of our lectionary. It has been passed down to us as a divinely inspired sacred text, the Word of God—yet how many of us have actually read the whole story? In a spirit of drawing close to the Jewish people, now might be a good time for us to discover (and cheer!) the heroine Queen Esther as part of our own biblical formation.

Along with the joyful character of Purim, a sombre note also sounds. In the Jewish liturgical calendar the Sabbath prior to Purim is called *Shabbat Zachor*, 'Sabbath of Remembrance.' On this day an added reading from Exodus tells of Amalek, traditionally identified as a biblical character of cruelty and an ancestor of Haman. Thus, while Purim brings to mind a moment of salvation for the Jewish people, the ever-present reality of human suffering and the commitment to resist evil are also remembered on *Shabbat Zachor*.

On the day (or a few days) prior to Purim observant Jews observe the Fast of Esther recalling Queen Esther's personal fast and that of the Jewish community prior to Esther's

intervention on behalf of her people (Esther 4:16). Purim closes with friends and family gathering for a special afternoon meal.

If you have Jewish friends, neighbours or colleagues, ask them to teach you more about Purim. Invite some conversation based on your reading of the Book of Esther. Allow this ancient story, packed with timeless meaning, to enliven your biblical and interfaith sensibilities.

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