

Tetzaveh/Zachor Sermon 5778

In 2001, Mel Brooks' musical version of 'The Producers' won more Tony Awards than any other show, ever. I remember the speech that Brooks gave in accepting the award for best musical, in which he said "I want to thank...Adolph Hitler, for being such a funny guy." If that was an odd remark, it made perfect sense in context, because 'The Producers' is based on the idea that a great way to make money would be to put on a show that was so awful that it would close quickly, and its producers could pocket the backers' investment. And what could be a more awful concept than a Broadway musical about the Nazis? 'The Producers' works as farce, because the play within the play, 'Springtime for Hitler,' is in such demonstrably bad taste. We laugh at it because it is such a horrible idea; we are laughing along with its producers. The irony of 'The Producers,' of course, is that against expectations, 'Springtime for Hitler' becomes a hit. Audiences think that making fun of Nazis is entertaining. The show is funny because it imagines the worst thing in the world in the silliest possible ways. And that is also why Purim works.

This is Shabbat Zachor, when we remember (*zachor*) the evil of the Amalekites in their attempt to destroy the Israelites in the wilderness. Each year we read those passages in the maftir Torah reading and the haftarah on the Shabbat just before Purim. The connection between the Amalekites and Purim is that the King of the Amalekites, Agag, is said to be an ancestor of Haman. But whether or not he is a direct descendant of Agag, Haman is certainly heir to the Amalekites' evil. He too tries to destroy the Jewish people through subterfuge. So on the Shabbat before the holiday when we remember Haman's attempted atrocity, we also remember his predecessors the Amalekites and their attempted atrocity. And how do we remember what could

have been genocidal destruction of the Jewish people? By being as silly as possible, dressing up, joking, drinking, playing jokes on one another and so on.

But, like ‘The Producers,’ the story and how it is heard are incredibly mixed up. That too is a tradition of Purim, to reverse everything to how it shouldn’t be. The Jews were supposed to be attacked; they end up routing their enemies. We are supposed to be serious and pious during religious services; on Purim, we are ridiculous. But the historical reversals are on a more serious level. If you were listening closely to the haftarah today, the book of Samuel makes it clear that God wanted King Saul to kill every single Amalekite, man, woman, child and beast. And when Saul does not do so, the monarchy is stripped from him and given to David. How did the prophet Samuel, who told Saul all this, remember the attack of the Amalekites, hundreds of years before? Not with jokes; there is probably no one less funny in the Tanakh than Samuel. No, for him and, one presumes, for God, attempted genocide is to be repaid with actual genocide against the descendants of the original transgressors. This is a very troubling passage, and the best I can do to ameliorate the guilt and embarrassment I feel about it is to read it as a hyperbolic fantasy rooted in real human emotions: When another people is attempting to destroy your people, the natural impulse is not only for self-preservation but for retribution, and today’s haftarah expresses those feelings.

After the time of Haman, and certainly after the destruction of the Temple, Jewish national power, meaning the power to command an army with the capability to destroy another people, dissipated. It returned in the 20th century of course, but for most of Jewish history we lacked the capacity for actual retribution, and so our tradition transformed it instead into ritual, comic retribution. The benefits of this approach are many: No one gets killed, among the Jews or

other people; we can incorporate the memory of every Amalek after Haman into our Purim observances; and we get to triumph, symbolically every year. The Amalekites as an actual people are gone. By remembering them and their end annually, we resurrect them in order to defeat them anew. It's like that joke Lenny Bruce used to tell: 'The Jews really did kill Jesus' he would say. 'I know because I found a note in my basement: "We did it." And you know what? When he comes back, we're going to do it again!' That joke, too, is meant to turn the powerlessness of past oppression on its head by reversing the roles of oppressor and oppressed through humor.

Lenny Bruce, like Mel Brooks, was a Jew who knew that you can conquer the memory of even the most horrible things, at least temporarily, if you distance yourself from them with humor. During the month of Adar, but especially on Purim, we can feel power over those who have wronged us, we can have our revenge on them, every year, and we can revel in the knowledge that we are still here while they and everything they represent are as dead as can be. And so on Purim, we'll drink to that as we remember what a funny guy Haman really was.