

Tetzaveh 5783  
Na'hafokh, Na'hafokh  
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What is the most important verse in the Torah? Ben Zoma says: It's the verse that contains even more of the Torah: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*—Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One (Devarim 6:4). Ben Nanas says: “It's the verse that includes even more: *V'ahavta l'rei'achah kamoachah*—Love your neighbor as yourself (Vayikra 19:18). Shimon ben Pazi says that *this* verse, from our parashah, is the most important verse in all of Torah, containing even more Torah than the others: Ready? “You shall offer one lamb in the morning and one lamb in the afternoon” (Shemot 29:39). Not the Shema, not the verse about loving other people, but a verse about the Korban Tamid, the daily sacrifice that was brought day in and day out, a command to constancy, much like the command in our parasha for a Ner Tamid—a flame to be kindled daily, like the one we now keep lit above the Aron Kodesh in our sanctuary.

Why is constancy so important? Because our regular habits and actions become our lives. We absolutely must sweat the small stuff because it becomes the big stuff. The ordinary, everyday stuff becomes who we are. The choices we make repeatedly become the major effects we have on our society and our world. As John Lennon put it, “Life is what happens when we're busy making other plans.”

The Kohanim and their tasks reinforce the message of constancy. Each new generation of priests is born into the same, precisely ordained duties. The arbitrariness of their selection creates an ordinariness that precludes cults of personality, hubris, and corruption that can accompany a political process of leader selection.

Ultimately, societies thrive on consistent application of their founding principles. Interpersonal relationships thrive on the day-to-day commitments we reinforce to one another. Saying or even texting “I love you” every day goes further than a fancy gift once or twice a year against a backdrop of emotional distance and uncertainty. We thrive individually on daily care for our basic and not-so-basic needs, more than a peak athletic or spa experience can sustain us. People who keep regular spiritual practices tend to feel more spiritually awake than those who show up for an isolated spiritual encounter, however charged it may be.

And critically, constancy also allows us to notice change and prompts us to modify behaviors, practices, and policies as necessary when we observe subtle changes in the way things are—in societies, organizations, relationships, and ourselves.

On this Shabbat, we anticipate Purim, one of whose major concepts is “*v’nahafoch hu*,” meaning that what is true at one moment can turn upside down and what we expected turns out the opposite. That’s not the same as constancy and paying attention to subtle shifts—but after we explore it briefly I will attempt to bring the ideas together.

Nahafoch: In Megillat Esther, the Jews end up not as victims but as victors. Haman is hung on the gallows he built for Mordecai. The King’s ring goes from Haman’s finger to Mordecai’s. An assimilated Jewish woman saves her people. And so on, Nahafoch.

Our plans, our lives, and our institutions sometimes feel as subject to the whims of chance as the lot Haman drew to determine the day of our fate—which turned out to be the day of his fate. The Megillah implies that we must always be on guard for the worst and hope for the best, for we cannot predict what will be.

And do you know what? That is not true. Well, it is true that surprises happen, some terrible and some wonderful. But most things do not crash or turn beautiful all of a sudden. If we’re paying attention, usually, we can predict what’s likely to happen. Most of the time, we truly are creating our future, by what we choose to do or not to do, in our relationships, in our society, and in our own life trajectories. And very often, we can shape that future if we’re paying attention. What Newton stated regarding objects tends to be true for human life and for society: Things will remain at rest or continue in linear motion unless acted upon by an external force that compels them to change. When things need to change, the only thing that will make them change is, of course, action.

Esther’s big moment comes when she becomes the change agent who saves her people: “Perhaps this is the moment for which you were created,” Mordecai tells her. Reinforcing the message that standing up to make a difference can actually make a *crucial* difference is one of the best aspects of Purim.

There is a subtle lesson about this in our haftarah, though somewhat in reverse. In our haftarah, God commands King Saul to put the Amalakites to the sword, every last one of them. Saul defeats them, and kills most of them, but he saves their king and the best of their cattle. He thinks he had fulfilled God’s command; he has only saved the best of the defeated Amalakites for a special offering to God. But God is angry and wants the prophet Samuel to strip Saul of his kingship. Samuel pleads on Saul’s behalf. Saul sees that he should have followed God’s instructions; he confesses and begs forgiveness, all to no avail. He is stripped of his sovereignty.

But really, what did Saul do that was so terrible that God would not forgive him? He behaved like an Amalakite. He preyed on the weak and powerless and gave privilege to the strong. The Amalakites had attacked stragglers among the newly liberated Israelites marching through the desert, picking off those who were “cheap” and had nothing to offer in their defense. Saul destroyed the people and livestock that were easy to kill and thought what was strong would bring him closer to God. But that is the antithesis of what God wants from us. Strength is not holy. Care for the vulnerable is holy. One who lacks that understanding is not fit to lead the Israelites—not then, and not now.

We are supposed to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We no longer have a functional priesthood; we’ve just got ourselves and whatever leaders we empower. We may not agree precisely on what holiness looks like, but we know what it does not look like.

Haman is a descendant of Amalek. Amalek is like an elephant in the room of the Jewish psyche, lurking around, resurfacing at this time of year. I think of him like a villain in a dream. In our dreams, we usually don’t perceive ourselves to be the villain, yet every character in our dreams links to something in our own selves that needs to be worked out in some deep way. We are meant to identify with the villain in order to learn how not to be a villain—in the case of Amalek, to not prey on the weak, to not pursue unrestrained power and hubris to not lose our moral compass.

With all of that in mind, I offer you some Purim Torah. Purim Torah traditionally means a farcical d’var on the Shabbat before Purim, comprised of satirical and humorous comments resembling rabbinic discourse. The Purim Torah I have for you comes from modern rabbinic discourse, in an email thread, and I’m sorry to say that it’s not funny. It’s in poem form, authored by Rabbi Deb Noily, with one slight change by me. It refers to the end of the Megillah, where the Jews of Persia turn around and massacre a whole lot of Persians. Here it goes:

And now, my friends, here comes the part  
That, if you have one, will break your heart.

Na’hafoch na’hafoch, it’s all reversed,  
All turned around and gone berserk.  
What’s good is bad what’s bad is good,  
There’s bloodshed where the hero stood.

Our people are spared, no one kills any Jews  
And that, of course, is very good news.

If only the story could stop right here,  
We'd offer thanks, we'd raise a cheer!

We'd dance and sing and shout in glee,  
We'd be just who we hoped we'd be.  
The Jews of Shushan would fall to their knees  
With gratitude for the Source of Being.

But no, my friends, we'll have no such luck.  
See what we do when we're not the lame duck.  
*(Originally: "As the story unfolds, we think, What the F—?")*  
For there is no G-d in the Book of Esther,  
No One to thank, so the violence festers.

Na'hafoch na'hafoch, it's all reversed  
All turned around and gone berserk.  
What's good is bad what's bad is good,  
There's bloodshed where the hero stood.

The Jews run amok, murdering Persians  
In place of salvation, now there's perversion.  
Seventy-five thousand, five hundred and ten  
Were killed that day, by Jewish men.

So when we think, *We Jews don't murder*  
We better try to investigate further  
The secret places deep in our hearts  
Where hatred lurks, and can tear us apart.

Na'hafoch na'hafoch, it's all reversed  
All turned around and gone berserk  
What's good is bad what's bad is good,  
There's bloodshed where the hero stood.

The poem is not new this year, but it could have been written based on the events of the past week. This past week was tragic for the Jewish People and an international disgrace for the State of Israel. Nothing that happened in the past week was unpredictable. None of it was discontinuous from patterns and actions long underway.

We cannot be a holy nation if we act in unholy ways. Although we may have almost nothing in common with those who commit atrocities and preach hate, we do have a role to play in shaping the destiny of our People. Many rabbis struggled this week over what to say to our congregations today. We want to bring joy and our hearts are breaking. We know that Amalek is our mirror, a descendant of Abraham through the line of Esav. He is more like us than we like to think, and as our mirror, only we have the power to shatter him. On this Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat of Remembrance, that is what we need to remember.

I am praying for the courage and fortitude to discern how I am meant to stand up and make a difference. Whether you call it prayer or not, I hope you are, too. Together, may we engage in a constant and watchful, active pursuit of goodness, holiness, and peace.