



Holiday: Purim

High Healing: A Purim Message

by Rebbetzin Hadassah Gross on Tuesday March 14, 2006

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Book of Esther, Purim

This morning, just after a fitting for my Purim gown, I visited the “closed-door” meeting of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement’s Rabbinical Assembly, a rather tedious affair, even with the agenda focused on as flamboyant an issue as gay rights. As an observant, Orthodox woman, I was pleased to observe the moral leadership of the committee’s rabbis, and I was impressed with their deep commitment to Jewish law. How well they take care of Judaism, I noted, and yet, I also wondered to myself, how well are they taking care of the Jews?

Perhaps the Conservative Movement’s rabbis can learn a lesson about responding to people’s need for modernity from Yisrael Meir Lau, Israel’s former Chief Ashkenazic Rabbi and my esteemed friend, who held a press conference this morning in Tel Aviv to promote a new Kosher McDonalds chain in Israel. The new restaurants will have blue signs, not the usual red, making it easier for those of us who keep kosher and are starved for new attractions to locate these safe dens in Israel’s malls. Rabbi Lau said: “Blue is the sky, blue is the prayer shawl. Blue is the flag of Israel. Blue is not red. There must be a clear difference, a sharp difference.”

I too love blue, and am deeply moved by the rabbi’s poetry and conviction, as well as his dedication to focusing on the important issues – meeting the people where they are and with what they want – McDonalds, sadly, in this case. But the bigger picture here is what matters to me – the insistence on the fundamentals of Judaism while being flexible to the needs of the times. Perhaps the Conservative rabbis can take an example from these blue signs and look for creative solutions to their halachic challenges?

Not that I am comparing Kosher McBurgers to gay Conservative rabbis, of course, but I am struck with these two stories, how ‘sharply different’ they are while also very similar. In your bed or on your plate – what is ‘in’ and what is ‘out’? Red or blue, kosher or treif, heterosexual and queer, Prada or Gucci – everyone is obsessed with labels. Certainly there is a time to honor labels and boundaries – but there is also a time to peel away the label and reveal the surprises that cannot be labeled, or that do not fit snugly into “small”, “medium”, or “large.”



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Purim night is upon us – the perfect opportunity to lose the labels, let loose, and put the fun back in fundamentalism – in strict accordance with Jewish law! This holiday is, in my opinion, the holiest one of the year. Although often neglected, Purim is dedicated to the courageous peeling away of labels, unmasking the safety of the familiar and entering the delicious territory of the unknown. Oh, how I love Purim!

I want to encourage each and every one of you – saint or sinner – to piously observe the important laws of Purim – especially the ones that ask us to go beyond the law, peel the label, turn the table, and drink the night away. Yes. Drink, kinderlach, or whatever it takes to blur the differences until you don't know the difference between Blue or Red, Mordechai or Haman, Jew or Gentile, Man or Woman, straight or gay, meshugena or mentsch. From this upside-down folly, taken seriously, much redemption is born to the soul! Some Kabbalists (my third and fourth husbands, for example) taught that in the future days, the only two holidays to remain on the Jewish calendar will be Yom Kippur and Purim – two days that are complete opposites but are both days of sacred transformation. Our ancestors understood that the only way to live with laws is to break them from time to time – or nothing will ever change.

Purim is also my birthday. Named after Queen Esther (whose real name is Hadassah), I was taught early on in life to honor my inner queen, glamorous and proud, bold and loud. This Purim, I want to encourage you too to come out of your skin, your closet, and your familiar face, and to walk in someone else's shoes for the night. This is the lesson of Purim. Imagine wearing a cross. Or cross dressing. So many opportunities for creative role-play! Discover your inner queen, or policeman, or geisha, or even your inner gay cowboy, or Conservative rabbi! And of course – lubricate. The Purim law is – Everything in moderation, including moderation.

I am planning to dance in the streets of Manhattan this Purim, and to crash the party at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary. Why not? The Conservative Movement needs some style, and a kick in the tuchis, and I have the perfect heels, Prada of course.



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