

## Purim 5770/2010: Queering the Already Queer

By Rabbi James Greene

Purim is a story of merriment, joy, overindulgence, and excess. A king, unhappy with his wife's disobedience, goes on the prowl for a new queen. He searches the entirety of his kingdom until he focuses in on Esther. There are costumes, fabulous parties, eunuchs, and cross-dressers – what could possibly be better! From the time we are young children we are taught that on Purim people should be joyful, that we should laugh at the silliness of all the festivities. And yet the joy of the holiday is often lost on some in the sexual minority community who find themselves within the story of Esther. After all, Esther is the woman in the closet, waiting to be freed from her narrow place and to announce who she truly is.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick takes us into the mind of Esther as she talks about the closeted life of our Jewish heroine. She writes that in the wake of Esther's need to come out to the king we see that "the particular operation of suspense around her would be recognizable to any gay person who has inched toward coming out to homophobic parents." Each of us can, in this moment, recognize our own story. As we stand in front of someone we love or someone we perceive has power over us, we all have wondered what their reaction to our journey might be. Will this person still love us? Will they understand? And the stakes could not be higher – Esther's very life and the lives of those in her community are at stake. Haman's threat to kill all the Jews is enacted, and only in the last moment does Esther find the strength within to come out and reveal herself.

Purim, we might argue, would be the perfect moment for a National Coming-Out Day. Congregations of all persuasions could celebrate with those Jews and fellow travelers who have come out, transitioned, or identified as part of the queer community. This wonderful holiday is a time to blur the boundaries, subvert the hetero-normative nature of Jewish tradition, and pull off the masks that too often push people back into the closet that they have worked so hard to break free from. The campy nature of costumes and cross-dressing only serves to enhance the inside-out feeling – that what is for most of the year on the inside can truly be released. Purim is not a time to put masks and costumes on; rather it is a time to let the true self out.

And within and around the Purim celebration, a ritual might be in order that honors the continual coming-out process that people in the queer community go through. It might be as simple as a communal blessing at the beginning of the ma'ariv (evening) service of erev purim (Purim evening). In Oregon, where I live, it might be having "the conversation" about marriage equality with someone in our circle of connection who is not actively supporting LGBTQ civil rights and encouraging them to take a public stand (this "conversation" strategy is the first organized step toward putting marriage equality on the ballot here in 2012).



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Each community, in a unique values-based decision, could thoughtfully develop its own ritualized moment. This mirroring of the story of Esther continues our tradition's mandate to see ourselves within the stories of our ancestors. A seder (ritualized meal) full of blessing could become part of the required festive meal as communities reenact some of the wonderful feasting of the Esther story – nine cups of wine for the nine banquets of Esther. Now that sounds like a party!

One year in seminary, right around the time of Purim, I went with a group of students to a local drag show in Philadelphia. The beautiful dresses, amazing dancing, and soulful expression of self were incredible! And as one of the teachers – my rabbi – was pulled onto the stage by the most beautiful drag queen I had ever seen and asked what she did for a living, I smiled and laughed. “I am a rabbi,” she said. “And these are my students!” she continued, pointing in our direction. As Purim arrives each year, I often reflect on that moment and wonder what the incredible celebration of personal freedom of the drag show continues to teach me. This year, I think it reminds me of the campy fun of Purim and the festive meal that Esther shares as she prepares to free herself from the closet. It calls me to create a seder with as much joy as that moment in a smoke-filled bar and to have “the conversation” as part of my fulfilling the mitzvot (the commandments) of the Purim holiday.

May this year be one of us queering the normal moments of Purim as we seek to find our true selves. As we recall our ancestor Esther and her personal coming-out story, may we be blessed to celebrate with all those who have taken off the masks to reveal their true selves. And may the one who creates all diversity in the Divine Image bless each of us with a diversity of ritual and life, and of equality in love.



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