

TETZAVEH – PURIM, PLAGUE AND POLITICS: A REPORT FROM AIPAC

March 7, 2020

Rabbi David Wolpe

So, there is an old Jewish joke about an asteroid that is about to hit the earth, and the entire world is going to be destroyed. And it's going to happen tomorrow. And so a reporter for the Yiddish newspaper runs into his editor, and he says an asteroid is going to hit the earth tomorrow and it's going to destroy everything. We have to put out the paper today though it's our last day what should the headline be. And the editor says oh it's clear with the headline is: “World about to be destroyed, Jews hit hardest”.

We do have a mentality, but in fact, in general catastrophes all human beings face many of the same conditions and we are aware of the fact that, at this moment, we are in what Dr. Seuss called, in one of his best books the waiting place. So, we have people who tell us that we should cancel everything, and people who tell us we should cancel nothing. People who say we should take every precaution in the world and people who say oh you're just being paranoid. And the honest-to-god truth is the only way we will know who is right is by seeing who is right, and therefore we take what precautions we can while trying to still live as best we can. And we are mindful of the fact that there are certain populations, the elderly and the sick, who are most vulnerable and so the rest of us take precautions not necessarily for ourselves, but because we know that in the midst of our own community, there are people who are vulnerable.

And although we may not seem this, way Purim is the perfect holiday to teach us about what we should do. Because if you will allow me to say so, Purim it is the holiday where Jews clearly, totally completely shockingly violate Jewish law and Jewish practice in order to

accomplish something that they think is important. No grandma ever said that because Esther did it, all Jewish women should beauty contests and married non-Jewish kings. They give us political sway but that's what she does on the advice of Mordechai. Which if you think about it is a very un-Jewish thing to do.

But there is a principle called *Pikuach Nefesh* which means "Saving a life," and so, for example the rabbi say, "Pikuach nefesh, docha Shabbat," because pikuach nefesh overrides the Sabbath. If somebody needs arrived in the hospital you don't say, "I'm sorry it's the Sabbath, you can just die off, it's fine." Because pikuach is the same word almost as pikeach and pikeach means to have your eyes open, in other words, you have to pay attention to what's going on in the world. You're not allowed to be blind to danger. And the other reason that Purim is such a good holiday for us to keep in mind is it is the one book, Megillat Esther, where God's name isn't mentioned. And it isn't hard to teach us that when you face a situation of danger you can't just say what God will get me out of it. You have to take whatever human action is possible in order to keep yourself and your community and your city safe. All of these considerations are going around all of our minds all the time now, and no two people will see all the things the exact same way, and there are articles from authorities that make different cases, and the truth is we'll see!

So, of the eighteen thousand Jews, well, Jews and non-Jews who went to AIPAC, some stayed home but most went. And there to remember the overriding lesson is what? The overriding lesson is, humanly, you have to take whatever action you can to keep Israel and the United States safe and close. You can't say, "God will protect Israel," no, you have to take human action. That's what we do. And there too the lesson of Purim is an important lesson: that so much of what goes on in our world is like Esther, whose name means "hidden." There is so much we don't understand, so much we don't know, and so much we cannot predict.

I am always amused by people who know what's going to happen because again and again and again the world up-ends us. So I just read—I don't know how many of you saw it—this morning in the Wall Street Journal, there was an article by somebody who says basically Biden was out of it for months and he said well I have to admit the humility of the political pundit. But it's not only a politics where people get things wrong. You remember in 2016 at the election how wrong all the political pundits were. It's also in life we guess but we don't know. We try to be safe, but we don't know how many precautions to take. So when we said we weren't going to take the tower around, there were some people who were very upset. Or when the Cantor said don't put your arm around somebody for L'Dor Va-Dor, I know some of you were upset. But you understand this is new for all of us. We're trying to do the best we can, and we feel like we have a responsibility not only to keep ourselves safe, but to keep everybody who walks in our door safe. So I know that you will help us, and cooperate with us, and be patient with us while we along with everybody else—literally in the world now—tries to figure out what is safest and best to do. The last day or two, I posted the beautiful last verse from Longfellow's psalm, which is,

Let us then be up and doing
 With a heart for any fate
 Still achieving
 Still pursuing
 Learn to labor and to wait.

And that's what we have to do. We have to do our best and wait. Take care of one another and wait, and hope that like the Purim story, it will all turn out happy. *Shabbat shalom.*