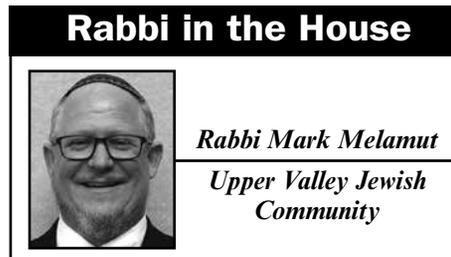


Looking at Purim in Our Contemporary World

The Torah mimics life, and life mimics the Torah. As a “Tree of Life,” our sacred narrative is not just historical, but ongoing and living, in real time. Even as life continues to be turned upside-down from COVID, to quote Jeff Goldblum in *Jurassic Park*, “Life finds a way.” Being turned upside-down and all around, while embracing life, reminds me of our upcoming holiday of Purim.

Purim begins on the evening of March 16. In the Purim story, we remember that Haman is after the Jewish people. We try and try to blot out his name with the sound of our groggers to no avail. He keeps popping his head up like in the old arcade game Whack-A-Mole. Today, threats of antisemitism are on the rise—if only our noise-making had the power to blot out the mess of living in our contemporary world. We know that at the end of the story, spoiler alert, “The opposite happened.” The Jewish people enjoyed light and joy, gladness



and honor (Book of Esther, 9:1, 8:16) What’s the end of our story? Can we find light and joy, gladness and honor, in our own lives?

For a fun holiday, Purim poses some serious questions, like, “Where is G-d?” Well, that depends. G-d’s name is not mentioned in the entire story. For some this means that G-d is there all along. Kind of like a spiritual hide and seek, *you* just have to look, because G-d is hidden (see the Hebrew word connection: *esther/his’tir* means hidden). For others, this means that G-d is simply nowhere to be found. Isn’t it true that

sometimes in our lives there are times when G-d or the Universe feel more present, more hidden, or nowhere to be found? The story of Purim is also filled with taking a stand, drunkenness, sexuality, violence, vengeance and refusing to bow down to tyranny. What a story!

Along with all of the oy, comes joy. Amongst the serious existential content of the Book of Esther, we also find some serious comedy and much needed levity. What’s a Jewish response when things become topsy turvy in our world? Study, pray, remember, bless, share, give, and nosh. Yes, on Purim we are commanded to recite a blessing and hear the whole megillah in addition to enjoying a festive meal. We remember to sound our groggers at the sound of “Haman.” And we also don costumes and laugh at the absurd. No matter what’s going on, laughter and levity can help to release the pressure valve of life. Purim prescribes collective laughter, as one way to express defi-

ance and build resilience for our people.

In addition, Purim’s mitzvot invite us to practice giving tzedakah to the poor and to create more joy by giving gifts to friends (*mishloach manot*). On this holiday, these simple acts are transformed into rituals. Each helps to connect us to others and to bring more meaning into the world. Taking care of those in need, as well as bringing a much-needed smile to friends’ faces, helps us turn from our own needs to look out into the world and to reach out. These days, who couldn’t use a holiday where we sit back, enjoy a good story, and nosh on a three-cornered cookie? In the playful and alliterative spirit of Purim, may this year’s hamentaschen overflow with poppy, and pack a punch that can push us through with the potency to ponder our collective potential. And may we all power through with abundant blessings into the next chapter of life’s whole megillah.

Happy Purim!

Education

If You Read The Reporter...

You Should Understand the Importance of Genetic Screening

By Dr. Marissa Baltus and
Dr. Stephanie Wolf-Rosenblum

Genetic screening is a subject many find complicated, but it has never been more important to understand what we know today and how such information might help keep you and your family healthy. This will be the first in a series of articles we hope will help explain the topic. Our goal is to increase awareness about the frequency of certain genetic disorders in the Jewish population, to promote screening, to address questions you may have and to provide options about how to get tested.

Both of us are board-certified internal medicine physicians who have lived in NH for more than 30 years, and who have raised our children here. During this time, we have increasingly recognized that there is a lot of misunderstanding about genetic testing. We are concerned that people are missing an opportunity to protect themselves and their families. So, we are writing this series to help our wider JFNH community understand the importance of genetic screening in improving health and preventing disease.

What is Genetic Testing?

Thanks to many advances in the ability to “read” an individual’s DNA, we can detect variations that have been found to be markers for various cancers and inherited diseases. Many people are aware of prenatal testing for Down’s Syndrome. Similarly, using blood or saliva sampling, tests can look either for inherited cancer genes (like for breast cancer) or for disorders that parents can pass on to their newborns, like Tay-Sachs and Cystic fibrosis. These and other conditions occur more commonly in the Jewish population, and because most of these disorders are “autosomal recessive”, they require that a gene from each parent be affected – so the parents may not be aware that they carry and/or can pass on the disorder. And because these so-called mutations also occur throughout the world, even families where one parent does not have (or is not aware of) Jewish lineage can be affected.

Are all People with Jewish Lineage at Risk?

Ashkenazi Jews, those of central or eastern European descent, tend to be

more at risk of carrying both cancer genes and genes that can cause congenital disorders in newborns.

There are also Mizrahi Jews — those who came from African or Central and West Asian countries, many of them Arabic-speaking Muslim-majority countries—and Sephardic Jews, who came from Spain and Portugal: these latter two groups are not usually at increased risk of the cancer genes, but they are at risk of genes that cause congenital disorders. And these genetic conditions can affect both women *and* men, including male breast cancer.

This is why it is important that all people with Jewish lineage have good counseling by a healthcare professional or geneticist who understands this information, to be sure that you have the right testing and can learn about options, should you have any of these markers.

If This is so Important, Why Haven’t I Heard More about it Before?

There are many possible reasons why healthcare professionals in the US have not traditionally included genetics in discussions about screening. Explanations

include the smaller size of the Jewish population in the US, lack of awareness in US healthcare professionals about the most common lineage in American Jews (Ashkenazi) and a lack of information about access to testing. In addition, testing was not always covered by insurance and was very expensive, often costing more than \$3,000. Today most testing costs < \$250, and accessibility is more widespread, like through J Screen. In Israel, genetic testing is much more common and is widely covered by the National Health Insurances.

When is the Best Time to be Screened?

For couples, the best time to have screening is prior to conception. For people who are being screened for cancer genes, it is recommended that this be done at age 21 or older.

We will cover more detail in future articles, and we welcome your questions. We will not be able to give individual advice, but we will pool your questions and do our best to include the answers in future columns.

B’Shalom.