

**Remembering Esther on Purim**  
**by the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
**Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation**  
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Why mention the dangers of drinking to excess in a Sunday service about the exuberant celebration of Purim? [Earlier in the service, someone read about concerns of rabbis and others regarding excessive drinking.] Is not the mention of drinking to excess a “downer,” something that gets in the way of the goal of having an uplifting, inspirational Sunday service? While inspiration is one goal of a Sunday service, it is not the only goal or necessarily the most important goal.

Unitarian Universalists expect to be challenged, as well as inspired, in the Sunday service. In exercising what is called the “freedom of the pulpit,” over the course of a month, I strive to craft services that grapple with what is going on inside the congregation, what is going on inside me, and what is going on in the world outside these walls. The service content reflects my best judgment about what is in the best interests of the congregation. If the content of last Sunday’s service was distressing, I will be glad to share resources with you. For every visitor or member who was turned off by last Sunday’s service, there may be a visitor or member who was impressed by this congregation and this religious tradition, which does not live in a dream world but in the real world.

Last Sunday, the service theme was about the physical safety and emotional safety of members and guests. We are at the nine-month mark of a 12-month process to figure out how to address issues of disruptive behavior and also the integration of sex offenders into congregational life. In June, the Board will recommend adoption of safe congregation policies (you saw the draft policies in last week’s Announcements).

Between now and June, the Board will schedule a meeting after a Sunday service to hear input on the proposed safe congregation policies. For the same reason that it is important to note the temptation to excessive drinking on Purim, it is important to note the responsibility of congregations to find ways to respect the inherent worth and dignity of all persons while protecting members, children, youth, and guests.

One of the most endearing aspects of Judaism, in the opinion of Lisa Katz, is the evolution of Jewish traditions over time. “Purim Shpiels started out as family, holiday entertainment, turned into professional performances--sometimes so vulgar that they were banned--for a paying public, and have become outreach tools for American Jewish synagogues and communities.”<sup>1</sup> [Rev. Ann quoted Lisa Katz regarding the evolution of “Purim Shpiels” from the 1400’s up to the present.]

Masquerading in costumes on Purim is a fairly recent addition to Purim.<sup>2</sup> “The exact date is debated. The practice probably did not exist in Middle Eastern countries earlier than 150 years ago. Sources in the oral law (or even some mystical works), which describe the validity of "hiding" (as it relates to Purim) are referenced to support this practice. [Rev. Ann quoted Wikipedia regarding masquerading on Purim.]

Does providence underlie apparently random events? Over the past week or so, a dear elderly friend of mine was hospitalized, had surgery on his hip, and was transferred to a nursing home for rehabilitation. I have experienced more “providence” in this time period than I can remember ever having had in any other week and a half in my life. I will not go into all the examples of providence, but I will share this example.

As the time neared of Fred’s discharge from the hospital to the nursing home, I carried with me a portfolio containing important legal papers (power of attorney papers, for example). One day after a visit, I placed into my car his walker and a vase of flowers. I set the portfolio on top of the trunk of my car, intending to retrieve it in a moment.

I drove away from the hospital parking lot, heading toward my home one mile away. After two 90 degree turns, I noticed that a man in the car in the adjacent lane was honking his horn and motioning with his hands, “Roll down your window.” I felt a bit annoyed, but I rolled down my car window. “Your papers fell off and are blowing all over the road!” he said. I retraced my

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<sup>1</sup> See “Purim Shpiels” by Lisa Katz, [http://judaism.about.com/od/purim/a/purim\\_play.htm](http://judaism.about.com/od/purim/a/purim_play.htm).

<sup>2</sup> See “Purim – Masquerading,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purim>.

route, parked the car, and retrieved most of the papers. This happened on Foothill Boulevard in Upland, on the famous Route 66, a four-lane thoroughfare.

A stranger who had seen the papers blow off my trunk stopped to retrieve a few more of them. I reached my home, where my mother was visiting from Wisconsin. I told her what happened. She reviewed the retrieved papers and said, "Two pages are missing." We got back into the car, aiming for the spot where the papers had blown off my trunk. Before we could get there, in fact a block away, mom said "There! Near the bus stop sign. There is one. And there, in the middle of the intersection is another one." To make a long story short, I retrieved every piece of paper that I had lost, and it felt like providence.

I conclude with another story. This story is about my personal relationship with the story of Esther. At a key point in my ministerial formation, at a time when I was feeling a bit discouraged at my prospects of ever serving a congregation as a Unitarian Universalist minister, my seminary advisor said, "You are Esther. You have made it this far. You are inside the palace. You are the wife of the king. Do not forget your people."

May we never forget our people in our day of privilege. May we relinquish *some* of our privilege and use the *rest* of it to benefit not only *our* people, but *all* people. May it be so!

<http://www.holidays.net/purim/jewloween.htm>

<http://www.holidays.net/purim/video.htm>