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Essay; Week Of Miracles

By WILLIAM SAFIRE

WASHINGTON— Time for long thoughts, because this is the week that joins two related religions in the celebration of miracles. (Christ's Last Supper took place during Passover; it is said to have been a Seder, but that's in dispute.)

Christians at Easter find a rebirth of spirituality in the miraculous resurrection of Christ; Jews at Passover recount to their children their people's miraculous escape to freedom to worship one God.

In conducting the Seder at my house, I confess to a creepy feeling when reading the enumeration of plagues and punishments visited on Pharaoh's people. Homes of the enslaved Jews were "passed over" by an angel of death slaying the firstborn of the Egyptians, in what seems today to be somewhat harsh punishment by the All-Merciful.

As others take up the reading, my thoughts drift to the sequel to that Book of Exodus, the even gorier Book of Esther.

The outline of her drama is familiar: After the Israelites were driven from Jerusalem, many found refuge in Persia. A beautiful Jewish girl, concealing her Hebrew name Hadassah, was selected by Xerxes I to be his queen. When the king's evil vizier, Haman, set a date for the extermination of all Jews in the kingdom, Esther was implored by her cousin Mordecai to intercede on her people's behalf.

Esther took her life in her hands by approaching the king, asserting her Jewishness and making the plea. Meanwhile, Mordecai tipped off the king about a plot he had uncovered: that Haman also planned to assassinate Xerxes and assume the throne. Xerxes empowered Esther and her cousin to get even with the anti-Semites on the day Haman had chosen by lot, or pur -- hence the feast of Purim.

Get even they did. Not only were Haman and 10 of his sons hanged on the gallows he had built to hang Mordecai, but tens of thousands of other anti-Semites were slain to wipe out empire-wide bigotry. Jews were welcome in Persia for thousands of years (though 13 are now suffering persecution in a secret Iranian spy trial).

But the Book of Esther is more than a tale of a heroine's patriotism. It comes toward the end of the Jewish Bible, and its admission into the canon was resisted by early rabbis. The secular narrative deals with the action of Jews in the Diaspora who never returned to Israel, and it is the only book in the Bible that does not mention God -- hinting only at unseen help from "another place."

A brilliant exegesis of this controversial work is "The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther," by Yoram Hazony, who runs the Shalem Center, a conservative think tank in Jerusalem. It holds that Jews accepted the Torah twice: first in Sinai with Moses in God's active presence, and many centuries later with Esther, far from the Promised Land, in God's apparent absence. Esther proved that "even in the grim new universe of the dispersion, the most fearsome evils may yet be challenged and beaten."

Esther -- wily, courageous, undespairing, loyal -- teaches that all of us must help each other seize and defend our freedom, just as the innocent Job taught that we must not look to God for earthly justice. The seas do not part for us anymore.

But do the stories of our resistance have to be so bloody? These biblical books do not shrink from the truth; retribution matched the ferocity of the onslaught. Breaking out of enslavement in Egypt, or obliterating Haman in Persia or his modern counterpart during the Holocaust, Jews learned that total war was justifiable when survival was at stake. And so we teach our children.

In our generation, as people of many religions and races confront more insidious bigotry, a symbolic reading of Exodus and Esther teaches the need to respond with nonviolent fierceness. We should denounce domestic demagogues; stand up to foreign dictators with moral and economic pressure; threaten terrorists with terrible retribution; and not let bigots anywhere get away with anything.

Enjoy the sweet horoseth, but bite fearlessly into the bitter herb. Distasteful as it may be at dinnertime, it pays to recount the bloody deeds of the past -- both by attackers and in our defense -- if such unrelenting annual remembrance girds the world against a recurrence of evil.

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