

PURIM AND PURPLE AND PAIN

ONE WIDOW'S STORY

Purim was always my favorite Yom Tov. I'm a creative soul, and once a year, I would let my imagination soar and take me way beyond the cobbled Meah Shearim streets around me. One year, I spent weeks in Istanbul – figuratively, of course. By day, my fingers would itch at the thought of getting to my sewing bag, where yards of cheap lining material in brilliant reds and golds waited to be turned into sultan's robes and stunning saris for my little ones. At night, I was in my glory, as I added a bit of sequins here; an epaulette there.

And the baking! The neighbors would drool at the smells coming out of my kitchen. The year I was "in" Istanbul, I made baklava – I rolled layers of dough so thin; you could see through them. Then I filled them with nuts, baked them, and drenched them in honey. My Sephardi neighbor said my baklava was as good as her grandmother's. That's saying a lot.

My sisters and sisters in law would tease me good naturedly about my Purim obsession. One Chanukah, we had a family grab bag and I got a box filled with baking supplies – to get me started early on my hamantashen. When someone said that it's probably a bit late for "Purim Perel", I laughed along with my family, but wouldn't dare tell them there were already three batches of perfectly formed Purim pastries in my freezer.

But all that is over. Two years ago, five days before Purim, everything changed. I was in the kitchen, chopping garlic to spread over my Purim roast, when someone knocked on the front door. I remember wondering who it could be, because the kids were in school and my husband was in yeshiva. When I saw the two policemen, my heart sank. And when they asked me if they could come inside, I knew my life had just changed forever.

They said there'd been an accident, and my husband was critically injured. I just wanted to know one thing – was he alive? They lowered their heads, and didn't answer. I screamed then, a scream that

came from a place inside me that I hadn't known existed. Then I turned numb. I went through the motions – sat through the *levaya*, tore my dress, hugged my children close. And when I finally came home, the first thing I saw was the purple velvet cape I'd sewn the day before. It was from a different world. Purple and mourning don't mix. Purim and mourning don't mix. That part of my life was over.

Last year was endless. Every day was torture. The pain was indescribable. I always thought that grief hurts emotionally, but



now I know that it's a real physical pain. I felt a stabbing in my heart, and I cried so much; my eyes and cheeks burned. The worst part of it was that life went on. My children had to go to school, meals had to be cooked, bills had to be paid. Bills had to be paid!

The day after *shiva*, I went through the mail, and suddenly, in a flash, it hit me that my husband's salary wasn't going to come anymore. I had nothing to live on! The realization was a fresh blow. I felt like I had fallen into the ocean, and was trying to stay afloat, but giant waves kept crashing over me, again and again and again; and I couldn't come up for air. I was drowning.

Somehow, I managed to call my sister. I was crying so hard, I couldn't talk; but she came rushing to my home. She held my hand and patted my back and promised to see what she could do to help. I knew she couldn't really do much, because her husband's paltry kollel check barely puts bread

in her ten children's mouths, but I underestimated her. She got in touch with an organization, Mesamche Lev. That very day, a *tzaddik*, Rabbi Ashkenazi, called me. For the first time since the policemen knocked on my door, I felt a glimmer of hope.

Anyway, last year, for the first time in my life, the approach of Adar didn't fill me with joy. Instead, it filled me with dread. My husband's *yartzeit* was coming up. Costumes and cooking were a world away. I couldn't even bring myself to take the Purim box down from the top shelf in my closet. Purple and mourning don't mix. Purim and mourning don't mix. In the back of my mind, I knew my children were hoping I'd pull myself together and celebrate, but I couldn't. The pain was too raw. Besides, Purim costs money. No. It wasn't going to happen.

On Purim morning, there was a knock at the door. It was a joyful knock, and six year old Rachel opened it.

"*Ima, Ima,*" she called, "Look!" The *bachur* at the door was carrying a huge basket wrapped in purple cellophane. A quick glance inside showed that it held lots of good food – and an envelope. The basket was from Mesamche Lev, and the envelope held a generous check.

I can't explain it, but somehow, the *mishloach manos* worked magic on me. It made a *v'nahapoch* on me. It totally changed my mood, and let me see things clearly. As soon as the messenger left, I gathered my children around me.

"*Kinderlach,*" I said, "it's Purim today, and on Purim we have to be happy. Do you want me to take down the Purim box and find you costumes?" The children's eyes shone. Five minutes later, my home was filled with giggles and fun, as the children oohed and ahed over long-forgotten masterpieces. Capes and clowns, saris and soldiers, the children made a colorful bunch as they traipsed out the door to join the Purim fun outside. And me? I put my pain aside, smiled, and went to join them. Didn't I tell you that Purim was always my favorite Yom Tov?