



*Parshat Pekude*  
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**You Just Won the Lottery. Now What?**  
by Rabbi Wesley Gardenswartz  
Temple Emanuel, Newton, MA

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I recently saw a film, and read an article, that made me realize we have all won the lottery. No matter what issues or problems we have going on in our lives, and we all have issues or problems going on in our lives, we have still totally won the lottery.

The film is called *They Shall Not Grow Old*. It is about the soldiers who fought and died in World War I. England had 100-year old footage about what it was like to be a soldier in the trenches. This footage was grainy, black and white, of poor quality. Peter Jackson, the director of the *Lord of the Rings* saga, takes this footage to his movie-making laboratory and applies the most modern technologies to it. The result is magic. Black and white turns to color. Murky becomes clear. The viewer is transported to World War I trenches, in living color.

It is not a pretty picture. Because we are celebrating the joyful B'nei Mitzvah of Matthew and Nathan, I will spare you the gory details. Suffice it to say these soldiers are given one outfit which they wear all day and all night, for years. There are no bathrooms. No showers. No beds. No place to come in from the cold. During the winter they are wet and freezing. They share the trenches with lice and rats. There are no hot meals. The food they subsist on looks barely edible. Many soldiers do not have teeth because they can't brush their teeth. They are famished, frozen, exhausted, and there is no escape. And that is before the fighting even begins. There are endless days of waiting for battle, and when the battle finally comes, it is fierce, frightening, and frequently fatal.

I could barely watch the film, from a safe seat in a Boston theatre. How did these soldiers stand it? It was then I realized that had I been born in England, or in Germany, in the late 1890s, I would have been fighting and dying in those trenches. *I* would not grow old.

By what right did we merit *not* being in those trenches? Only the accident of the circumstances of our birth. When we were born. Where we were born. We received infinite blessings at birth we did not deserve. We won the lottery.

We won the lottery not only because we were not born in the 1890s. We also won the lottery because we were not born in Venezuela. Recently there was an article in the New York Times about the fact that *millions of* Venezuelans are leaving their country by foot with nowhere to go and no way to get there, they just have to get out now. Here is the first part of the article.

The economic crisis that has engulfed Venezuela...has set off a staggering exodus... with more than three million people leaving the country... — largely on foot.

They are fleeing dangerous shortages of food, water, electricity and medicine, as well as the government's political crackdowns....

Rolling suitcases behind them, some walk along highways, their salaries so obliterated by Venezuela's hyperinflation that bus tickets are out of reach...

But no matter their destination, the vast majority come through these treacherous roads in Colombia: a 125-mile journey over a 12,000-foot pass here in the Andes Mountains. "It's the coldest place I've known in my life," said Fredy Rondón, who had come from Venezuela's capital, Caracas, with a single bag of belongings...

What a heart-breaking story. There are no words to take in their suffering. Venezuelans did nothing to deserve this. Had we been born in Venezuela, this would be our life. We won the lottery.

What do we do in response? We can get some helpful insight from the upcoming holiday of Purim. Purim is different from every other Jewish holiday, and the book of Esther is different from every other book in the Hebrew Bible. In all the other holidays, and in all the other books,

God is the central actor, and God acts in accordance with the moral virtues of the Israelites. When we are good, God is good to us. When we are bad, God is bad to us. God is in control. We get what we deserve.

But the Book of Esther has a completely different take. For starters, the Book of Esther is *the one book* in the Bible where God does not even appear. Read the book from cover to cover, you cannot find *any* mention of God.

If God does not control what happens, what does control what happens? The answer—a surprising answer for a book of the Bible—is luck. There is such a thing as luck, good luck and bad luck, that happens regardless of our merits.

Haman gets King Ahasuerus to issue his extermination decree. Let me put this in contemporary terms. Haman goes to the King in April and says let's kill all the Jews and take all their property. The King says: Okay. When do you want to do it? Haman resorts to a lottery. The biblical word for lottery is Purim. They cast the lot, and it could have come out that the extermination decree would go into effect immediately, in April or May, in which case the Jews would not have had the time to mount a defense. But as luck would have it, the extermination decree would not go into effect until March, nearly a full year later. This gave the Jews time to defend themselves and fight back. Thus Mordechai had the time to get Ester to reveal herself as a Jew, and to approach the King to try to save the Jewish people. Luck and pluck saved our people. Without the luck, the pluck would not have been enough.

The Jews of Persia won the lottery. That is why the name of the holiday is Lottery, Purim.

The holiday of Purim is not just fun for the kids, it is super relevant to adults because it deals with the very real and adult theme that luck happens and has a huge impact on our day to day lives. How should we respond to the importance of luck as an important driver of our lives? How should we respond to the fact that, due to when and where we were born, we all won the lottery?

There are four mitzvot associated with Purim. Each offers a healthy response to winning the lottery.

The first mitzvah is *matanot l'evyonim*, giving tzedakah to those who are less fortunate. We ourselves could have been less fortunate. We could have been in the trenches. We could have been walking out of Venezuela on foot. There but for the grace of God go I. If we happen to have won the lottery, let's have the humility and generosity to help others.

The second mitzvah is *mishloach manot*, those care packages of pretzels and chocolate and cookies. It is not about the carbs, it is about the connection and the community. Because we are all vulnerable to the whims of fortune, we all need to situate ourselves in a caring community.

The third mitzvah is to rejoice in a Purim seudah, a festive Purim meal. Tomorrow is promised to no one. Savor what we have while we have it by enjoying food and wine with those we love today.

Then there is the fourth and final mitzvah of Purim, which is to *hear* the megillah. Why this mitzvah? The Purim story is a redemption story. There was a mortal danger, and through courage and activism, and a lot of luck, the Jews effected their redemption. We are commanded to hear the megillah so that we ask ourselves: *what redemption story am I a part of?* How will

the world be better off because I am here? Megilat Ester invites us to find our own way to do what Kareem Abdul Jabbar recently did.

Kareem Abdul Jabbar is one of the greatest basketball players in the history of the game. But he does not want his basketball acclaim to be his contribution to a redemption story. Last weekend he auctioned off his championship rings, made of silver and gold and studded with diamonds, and other precious memorabilia from his playing days. Why sell these precious artifacts? In order to invest the proceeds to help kids learn about science, technology, engineering and math. His redemption story is to do his part to make the rising generation of Americans strong in STEM. He writes in his blog:

When it comes to choosing between storing a championship ring or trophy in a room, or providing kids with an opportunity to change their lives, the choice is pretty simple. Sell it all. Looking back on what I have done with my life, instead of gazing at the sparkle of jewels or gold plating celebrating something I did a long time ago, I'd rather look into the delighted face of a child holding their first caterpillar and think about what I might be doing for their future. That's a history that has no price.

By parting with his championship rings and other memorabilia, Kareem Abdul Jabbar raised almost 3 million dollars to give to children to learn science, technology, engineering and math. He was a legendary player, and he now finds new ways to contribute to his redemption story. What is *our* redemption story? How are we adding to it?

We are not in the trenches. We are not climbing up the Andes Mountains desperately searching for a safe place to call home. We are here in this beautiful and warm sanctuary. We did not deserve this. We were born to this. *We have all won the lottery.* What do we do about it? Purim points the way. Give tzedakah. Build your community. Savor every day. And find a great and noble purpose to which to devote your life. Shabbat shalom.