

to kill us. We won. Let's eat!" And like many jokes, there's a nugget of truth there. By and large, Jewish holidays do celebrate our tenacity in the face of religious persecution, and our survival time and again over nearly insurmountable odds. The delicious and distinctive food which graces these celebrations is a common theme too, of course. So what sets Purim apart? And what does it teach us in our day?

Purim is a holiday where from the beginning of the story, nothing is as it seems. Though it opens with a raucous banquet, darker intentions towards the Jews of Persia are quickly revealed. Esther, the new queen, is a quiet and self-contained presence in the palace until she takes on a singular act of courage to save her people. And Haman, the king's advisor who plans for the Jews' annihilation, in the end, receives the very consequence he had intended for them. Meanwhile, Esther's uncle Mordechai is given the honor Haman had so coveted for himself.

Perhaps because the plot twists of the Purim story are so surprising and satisfying, it gives us the freedom to experiment with a lighter reaction to serious events. On

to their own mission, "a congregation and educational institute where life is celebrated and every soul matters." It would be easy to read that mission with a sprinkling of cynicism, to doubt that any institution, especially one that houses the formally incarcerated and addicted, could be open to welcoming every soul, no matter who you are or what you have done in your life. But after spending 30 hours learning with the rabbi who directs their spiritual counseling, I believe it. The rabbis, teachers and counselors who run Beit T'shuvah truly believe that every single person is deserving of redemption in this life, no matter what.

Some of you may remember that on Rosh Hashanah I spoke about my pen-pal, who is an incarcerated man in Southern California. We have continued to write to one another since then, and I have been impressed, over and over again, by his musings about Judaism: "The Jewish peoplehood is about connection between people, a feeling of belongingness, to a community of the past, present, and future. The way we speak about peoplehood has to change and be expanded to explicitly include our diverse community of different faiths,