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But he disdained to lay hands on Mordechai alone; having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordechai's people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus. (Megillat Esther 3:5)

We all know communities include both bullies and allies. In the story of Purim, those roles are somewhat obvious: Haman is a bully and Mordechai is an ally. Life isn't always that simple, however, and it is our responsibility to recognize that, examine the relationships in our lives, and learn to set boundaries between ourselves and the "Hamans" around us, just like the characters of the Megillah. In the story, readers learn about the great deal of power Haman wields. Yet his ideals did not win out — thanks to the behind-the-scenes miracles God carried out and the people who chose to stand up to him. The story of Purim makes no explicit reference to God, instead choosing to highlight and emphasize the humanity of its characters and the community and how to best engage with one another in times of crisis.

The way Mordechai responds when he learns about Haman's plot to destroy the Jews can teach us about setting proper boundaries for ourselves. His immediate response is one of anxiety and despondency:

Mordechai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes. He went through the city, crying out loudly and bitterly until he came in front of the palace gate. (Megillat Esther 4:1)

Standing up for what he believes is right and protecting those around him who need it are core parts of who he is as a person. But he also knows when he isn't in a position to accomplish a goal — neither practically nor emotionally — and employs the help of someone who actually can make an impact.

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With his words and actions, Mordechai sets an example for his community by setting boundaries for himself while supporting Esther as she makes her own choices about how she wants to face Haman in her own way. Mordechai is Esther's ally, someone in whom she can confide and look to for strength. He knows she must decide for herself what she will do and which consequences she is willing to accept.

> "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him. (Megillat Esther 4:16-17)

Learning to set boundaries between ourselves and people who are harmful to us is crucial to mental health and wellness — as is learning to set boundaries between ourselves and circumstances we cannot handle like Mordechai did. Just as we cheer for the "good guys" and boo the "bad guys" when we hear the Megillah on Purim, it is good for our mental health to identify who or what in our lives is a "Haman" and who or what is a "Mordechai." However, when we reflect on these ideas and decide which boundaries to set or the people to whom we can go to for help, we must remember that our lives aren't always like the Purim story. Many relationships and aspects of our day-to-day lives may not fit neatly or clearly into one category of either "good" or "bad," which is normal. Life is complex, but it is up to us to pay attention, perform a cheshbon hanefesh, and decide what is most important and healthy for ourselves.

HAMAN

MORDECHAI

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ACTIVITY

Identify the "Hamans" in your life (politics, bullies, cold weather, etc.) on the hamentashens. On the Stars of David, identify the "Mordechais" in your life. Reflect on the complexities of those relationships. Are they all "good" or "bad"? If you choose to act on or make changes in any of these areas, what are the likely consequences? Will that change how you feel about them? What boundaries can you make with them, and how can you best be a good ally while letting those around you make their own choices?

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