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*March 2015 • Purim 5775*

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who Herb blessed with his participation for over two decades.



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# A Tribute to Herb Smilowitz

Rabbi Hyman Arbesfeld

Vice Chairman, RIETS Board of Trustees • RIETS '56

Herb Smilowitz served on the Board of Trustees of RIETS for more than 20 years. The members were so impressed with this man, who was so outstanding yet humble, that he became the vice chairman soon after joining the Board, something that he tried to turn down.

When the position of chairman became available, and which by tradition belonged to him, he declined, saying that a *musmakh* (someone ordained by RIETS) should be the chairman. He rarely missed a RIETS meeting, whether it be the full Board or even various RIETS committees. Herb always arrived early and when asked why he always came so early, he answered: “When you come from New Jersey, the only way to be sure to come on time is to come early.”

At a Chag HaSemikhah ceremony 10 years ago, he was honored with the most prestigious award RIETS can grant, the Etz Chaim Award. This honor was forced on him. The beautiful reception that followed was remembered by all.

In 2008, Herb and his son, Rabbi Mark Smilowitz, a *musmakh* of RIETS, were the guests of honor at the RIETS annual dinner, held at the Grand Hyatt Hotel and attended by more than 700 people. As you can imagine, Herb did not want this recognition. Rabbi Mark’s impressive address was the highlight of that dinner.

We now honor his memory. How fitting this is for such a memorable person. Yes, Herb will forever be in our memory. He was truly a one-of-a kind person.

# Mordechai and Esther: The Evolution of a Relationship

Rabbi Yosef Blau

Senior Mashgiach Ruchani, Yeshiva University • RIETS '61

*There was a Jew in Shushan the capital whose name was Mordechai ... And he raised Hadassah, who is Esther.*

**Esther 2:5-7**

איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמם מרדכי ... ויהי אומן את הדסה היא אסתר.

אסתר ב:ה-ז

*Esther did not reveal her nationality or her lineage because Mordechai commanded her not to reveal it.*

**Esther 2:10**

לא הגידה אסתר את עמה ואת מולדתה כי מרדכי צוה עליה אשר לא תגיד.

אסתר ב:י

From the first mention of Mordechai's name it is clear that he is the hero of the story. Our custom is for the entire congregation to recite the verse describing Mordechai. Hadassah, who is Esther, is mentioned in terms of her relationship to him. She is totally submissive to him and follows his instructions without question. When she is taken to the king's palace, Esther, as commanded by Mordechai, does what Hagai, who is in charge of the women, tells her. Even when chosen as queen, what is important is what Esther doesn't do. Listening to Mordechai, she doesn't reveal her nationality or background.

The pattern is clear: active Mordechai and passive Esther. When Esther does speak to the king about the plot to kill him, she does so on behalf of Mordechai. Mordechai discovers the plot and is the only one courageous enough to refuse to bow down before Haman. The Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74b, justifies Esther living with a non-Jewish king by seeing her role as passive (אסתר (קרקע עולם היא).

*Esther said to respond to Mordechai ... And Mordechai left and did exactly as Esther had commanded him.*

**Esther 4:15-17**

ותאמר אסתר להשיב אל מרדכי... ויעבור מרדכי ויעש ככול אשר צותה עליו אסתר.

אסתר ד:טו-יז

At the critical moment when Mordechai turns to Esther and admonishes her for doing nothing for the Jewish people, the roles begin to shift. Initially, Esther is removed, apparently personally safe, since Haman does not know that she is Jewish. Mordechai challenges Esther to respond as

the Queen of Persia. Based on the earlier parts of the Megillah, we would have expected Mordechai to outline the strategy that Esther should employ to influence the king.

Yet there is no indication that he played any role in advising her. In fact, Esther gives instructions to Mordechai. Once Esther agrees to act, she alone has to determine how to reduce the power and influence of Haman. Esther is no longer passive. She emerges as the heroine of the story.

Strikingly, at the turning point, when Haman goes to the king to gain approval to hang Mordechai, the reversal does not include any action by Mordechai. Haman was forced to dress Mordechai in royal clothing and make a proclamation about him, but Mordechai is the object and the Megillah doesn't record anything he said.

From that moment Esther and Mordechai are partners in the leadership, with each having a different role to play. It is Esther's intervention that leads to the king giving authority to Mordechai. In the dialogue between Achashveirosh and Esther it is clear that she has mastered the art of getting him to listen to her instructions while not threatening his authority.

*And Mordechai wrote these things and he sent letters to all of the Jews ... And Esther the queen, daughter of Avichayil, and Mordechai the Jew wrote all of the acts of power to confirm the second letter of Purim.*

**Esther 9:20, 29**

ויכתוב מרדכי את הדברים האלה וישלח ספרים אל כל היהודים... ותכתוב אסתר המלכה בת אביחיל ומרדכי היהודי את כל תקף לקים את אגרת הפורים הזאת השנית.  
**אסתר ט:כ, כט**

After the victory, Mordechai, the religious leader of the community, proclaims the holiday of Purim. For unclear reasons a second letter is needed to gain full acceptance of Purim. This second letter has to come from the two of them with Esther's name appearing first.

One can view this transformation from two equally correct perspectives. One can focus on Esther's growth and ability to take on a leadership role. She emerges as a model for Jewish women. Her commitment extends beyond the story as she sacrifices her desired way of life by remaining married to Achashveirosh, a gentile and a foolish king. The survival of the Jewish people depended on her and she rose to the occasion.

Alternately, one can focus on the mentor-student relationship. Mordechai is clearly Esther's mentor. Initially, the pupil depends totally on the teacher. But Mordechai and Esther understand that the goal has to be for the pupil to become independent. Esther faces a challenge where she must initiate to be successful. There was no direct lesson that could be applied. When one reads the Megillah for the first time one expects Esther to plead for her people at the first party. Her insight into the character of her husband, realizing that it was necessary to increase his apprehension in order to ensure that he would turn against Haman, is brilliant.

The emergence of a woman and a pupil as a savior of the Jewish people is a lesson that should motivate us to bring out the hidden potential that is within us.

*This article is dedicated to the memory of Herbert Smilowitz, a quiet yet strong leader, a gentleman who was a model of integrity.*

# Amalek and Yitro: What's the connection?

Dr. Lisa Fredman

Principal, YTA Girls' High School in Jerusalem • SCW '85

On Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat preceding the holiday of Purim, we read the Torah portion from Deuteronomy which describes the attack of Amalek upon the Israelites:

*Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of G-d, he surprised you on the march when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear... "*

**Deut. 25: 17-18<sup>1</sup>**

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בַּדֶּרֶךְ  
בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם: אֲשֶׁר קָרַךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ  
וַיִּזְנֹב בְּךָ כָּל הַנְּחָשָׁלִים אֲחֵרֶיךָ וְאִתָּה עָגַר  
וַיִּגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹהִים:  
דְּבָרִים כה: יז-יח

This was an unprovoked attack, an ambush, on the defenseless weary Israelites lagging at the rear of the camp; this attack showed that the Amalekites lacked even the most elementary decency.

Rashi, based on midrashic literature, emphasizes that Amalek was the first nation to attack Israel and embellishes Amalek's wickedness to include divination, sorcery and mutilation.<sup>2</sup>

The Amalekite attack was initially recorded in the book of Exodus (Ex. 17: 8-16). Immediately following the Amalekite ambush we read of the arrival of Yitro (Jethro) at the Israelite camp:

*Jethro Priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that G-d had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt ... Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness where he was encamped at the mountain of G-d...*

**Ex. 18:1-5**

וַיִּשְׁמַע יִתְרוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה אֵת כָּל  
אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֱלֹהִים לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ  
כִּי הוֹצִיא ה' אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם: ...  
וַיָּבֵא יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה וּבָנָיו וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אֶל  
מֹשֶׁה אֶל הַמַּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר הוּא חֹנֶה שָׁם הַר  
הָאֱלֹהִים:  
שְׁמוֹת יח: א-ה

Yitro will propose to Moshe recommendations for reorganizing the judicial system in Israel (verses 1-27). *Mekhilta Yitro* 1:1 questions whether the Yitro narrative is in its proper chronological place:<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> All English biblical translations are taken from the New JPS Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society: Philadelphia 2003).

<sup>2</sup> First Nation: see Rashi to Ex. 17:14, Num. 24:20, Deut. 25:18; Divination: see Rashi to Ex. 17:12; Sorcery: see Rashi to Ex. 17: 9, 1 Sam. 15:3; Mutilation: see Rashi to Deut. 25:18, 1 Sam. 15:33.

*And he heard. What information did he hear that caused him to come? He heard about the war with Amalek and came, as we find that the two stories are juxtaposed one after the other. This is the opinion of R' Joshua. R' Elazar of Modi'im says: He heard about the revelation at Sinai and that caused him to come...*

וישמע. מה שמועה שמע ובא?  
מלחמת עמלק שמע ובא, שהיא  
כתובה בצדו, דברי ר' יהושע. ר'  
אלעזר המודעי אומר, מתן תורה  
שמע ובא...

The *Mekhilta* brings two opinions. The first opinion of R' Yehoshua views the narratives as being in their proper chronological sequence. The second opinion of R' Elazar believes that Yitro's arrival took place after the revelation at Sinai, and the narratives are, therefore, not in chronological order.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (longer commentary to Ex. 18:1) accepts the opinion of R' Elazar, that Yitro came after the Sinai revelation;<sup>4</sup> the following are a number of his arguments:<sup>5</sup>

- A. The Bible states that Yitro offered burnt offerings to G-d (Ex. 18:12) but does not state that he built an altar on which to sacrifice them. This indicates that he sacrificed on the altar that he found in existence, the altar of the Tabernacle.<sup>6</sup>
- B. Moshe tells Yitro, "and I make known the laws and teachings of G-d" (v. 16); this indicates that the Sinai revelation, the giving of the laws and teachings, had already occurred.<sup>7</sup>
- C. When Yitro arrives at the Israelite camp, the biblical text states, "where he was encamped, at the mountain of G-d" (v. 5). The use of the participle *choneh*/חונה (encamped) indicates that Moshe had been encamped there for an extended period of time.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See *Zevahim* 116a.

<sup>4</sup> The longer commentary was composed during 1153-1156 in Rouen, Northern France. The same idea is expressed in his shorter commentary as well; the shorter commentary was completed in the year 1145 in Lucca, Northern Italy.

<sup>5</sup> Generally, Abraham Ben Ezra uses the phrase "אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה" to express the idea that paragraphs are not written in chronological order; this phrase appears eight times in his *Commentary to the Pentateuch* (Gen. 6:3; 11:29; Ex. 4:19; 16: 15; 32:11; 33:7; Lev. 25:1; Deut. 31:15). Yet in our case the idea is expressed without the use of this term. See I. Gottlieb, *Order in the Bible* [Hebrew], (Magnes Press: Jerusalem 2009). Nahmanides disagrees and believes that the juxtaposition of the Amalekite attack and the arrival of Yitro is in chronological order; see Nahmanides' commentary to Ex. 18:1. Rashi's opinion is unclear; compare Rashi's commentary to Ex. 18:1 with his commentary to Ex. 18:9.

<sup>6</sup> "However, I believe that Jethro came to Sinai in the second year, after the erection of the tabernacle. For the chapter speaks of a burnt-offering and sacrifices for God (v. 12), and it does not mention that he built a new altar." "ולפי דעתי, שלא בא רק בשנה השנית אחר שהוקם המשכן, כי כתוב בפרשה 'עולה וזבחים לאלהים' (שמות יח יב), ולא הזכיר שבנה מזבח חדש."

<sup>7</sup> "Furthermore, Scripture writes, and I make them know the statutes of God, and His laws (v. 16). Now this took place after the giving of the Torah."

"ועוד, כתיב 'והודעתי את חקי האלהים ואת תורותי' (שמות יח טז), והנה זה אחר מתן תורה."

<sup>8</sup> This explanation of the Ibn Ezra's words (as well as the translations of these words) is taken from: *Ibn Ezra's Commentary to the Pentateuch, Exodus*, translated by H. N. Strickman & A.M. Silver, (Menorah: New York 1996), p. 343, n. 21.

"True proof that my words are correct is the fact that Scripture clearly states, where he was encamped at the mount of God (v. 5)"

"והעד הנאמן על דברי, כי כן כתיב, 'אל המדבר אשר הוא חונה שם הר האלהים' (שמות יח ה)."

D. In Deuteronomy, Moshe states, "The Lord our G-d spoke to us at Horeb, saying: You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Start out and make your way ..." (Deut. 1 6-7). These words were stated before the Israelites left the Sinai Desert (they are still at Horeb, the mountain of G-d). In Deuteronomy, immediately after this directive, Moshe recounts his concern of judging the people alone and the advice given to him to appoint additional judges. This was Yitro's advice given to him the day after his father-in-law's arrival in the Israelite camp. Thus we see that Yitro arrived just before the Israelites left the Sinai desert.<sup>9</sup>

Why is the biblical narrative not in order? What is the cause of deviation from chronological sequence? Abraham Ben Ezra posits that the Biblical text purposely wished to juxtapose the wickedness of Amalek with the friendliness of Yitro. The juxtaposition of these two narratives highlights the contrast in their behavior towards the Israelites.

Cassuto points out subtle verbal associations which link our two narratives:<sup>10</sup>

Amalek (chapter 17)	Yitro (chapter 18)
And Amalek <b>came</b> and <u>fought</u> with Israel (v. 8)	And Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, <b>came...</b> (v. 5) And they asked each other of their <u>welfare</u> (v. 7)
<b>Choose</b> for us men (v. 9) [for war]	And Moses <b>chose</b> able men (v. 25) [to judge]
And he <b>sat</b> upon it (v. 12)	Moses <b>sat</b> to judge the people (v. 13)
And Moses' hands grew <b>heavy</b> (v. 12)	For the thing is too <b>heavy</b> for you (v. 18)
I will <b>stand</b> (v. 9)	While all the people <b>stand</b> about you (v. 14)
Until the sun set (v. 12)	Until evening (v. 13)
Tomorrow (v. 9)	Next day (v. 13)
<u>War</u> ... from generation to generation (v. 16)	And all this people will also go to their place in <u>peace</u> (v. 23)

The antithesis between the two episodes is heightened through the shared language. Cassuto notes that chronological order which is important in Greek and modern literature is less important in ancient Eastern writings including the Bible. He explains: "that does not mean that the Pentateuchal arrangement is arbitrary; there are rules and methods ... one of the methods is

<sup>9</sup> "For Moses is quoted in the Torah portion, These are the words as saying, The Lord our God spoke unto us in Horeb saying, turn you and take your journey (Deut I:6,7) Now this was said close to their time of journey ... the time for you to inherit the land has come. However, since you are so numerous I was not able to carry you alone, and I had to place over you captains of thousands and captains of hundreds. Now this was the advice of Jethro on the morrow following his coming to the wilderness of Sinai."

"והנה דברי משה יוכיחו, שאמר בפרשת אלה הדברים: 'ה' אלהינו דבר אלינו בחרב לאמר, רב לכם שבת בהר הזה פנו וסעו לכם (דבר' א, ו - ז), והנה זה הזמן היה קרוב למסעם, והוא אמר ... והגיע זמן שתירשו את הארץ. ובעבור שהייתם רבים, לא יכולתי לבדי שאת אתכם לבדי, והוצרכתי לתת לכם שרי אלפים ושרי מאות (ראה שם, טו). וזאת היתה עצת יתרו, שנתן לו ממחרת באו למדבר סיני."

<sup>10</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, (Magnes Press: Jerusalem 1967), p. 212.

to arrange the subject matter on the basis of association—both thematic and verbal association."<sup>11</sup> The juxtaposition of the Amalek and Yitro narratives for a thematic reason was more significant than the chronological sequence.

There is lack of clarity regarding the tribal association of Moshe's father-in-law. In the Pentateuch, his father-in-law is designated as a Midianite (Ex. 18:1; Num. 10:29), yet in the Book of Judges he is identified as a Kenite (Jud. 1:16; 4:11). Perhaps Midian was composed of a number of tribes/clans and the Kenites were one of these tribes. Sarna proposes that the name Kenite is not an ethnic designation but a description of the occupation of metalworking.<sup>12</sup>

The pairing of Amalek and Yitro's descendants, the Kenites, is found later in the Bible. In Balaam's final oracle we read:

*He saw Amalek and, taking up his theme he said: A leading nation is Amalek; But its fate is to perish forever. He saw the Kenites and taking up his theme, he said: Though your abode be secure, And your nest be set among cliffs, Yet shall Kain be consumed, When Asshur takes you captive.*

**Num. 24: 20-22**

כ וַיֵּרָא אֶת עַמְלֵק וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר  
 רֵאשִׁית גּוֹיִם עַמְלֵק וְאַחֲרֵיתוֹ עַדִּי  
 אֲבָד: כֹּא וַיֵּרָא אֶת הַקֵּינִי וַיִּשָּׂא מִשְׁלוֹ  
 וַיֹּאמֶר אֵיתָן מוֹשְׁבֵךְ וְיָשִׁים בְּסַלְעַ  
 קַנָּה: כִּב כִּי אִם יִהְיֶה לְבַעַר קָנוֹ עַד  
 מָה אֲשׁוּר תִּשְׁבֶּךְ:  
 בַּמִּדְבָּר כֹּד: כ-כב

Balaam's ability to view Amalek and the Kenites almost simultaneously indicates that they were dwelling close to one another. Whereas Balaam clearly states that the nation of Amalek would perish- in contrast, the Kenites would be temporarily exiled by Assyria.<sup>13</sup>

Later in the Bible, once again we will find Amalek and the Kenites in close proximity. In the Book of Samuel I, chapter 15 King Saul is commanded by the Prophet Samuel to war against and destroy the nation of Amalek.<sup>14</sup> This command is a punishment for the Amalekite's heinous attack on the Israelites as they left Egypt. King Saul gathers his troops and preceding the battle we read:

*Saul said to the Kenites, "Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them; for you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt." So the Kenites withdrew from among the Amalekites.*

**Sam. I 15:6**

וַיֹּאמֶר שְׂאוּל אֶל הַקֵּינִי לְכוּ סְרוּ רְדוּ  
 מִתּוֹךְ עַמְלֵקִי פֶן אֶסְפְּךָ עִמּוֹ וְאַתָּה  
 עָשִׂיתָה חֶסֶד עִם כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 בְּעֲלוֹתָם מִמִּצְרָיִם וַיִּסֶר קֵינִי מִתּוֹךְ  
 עַמְלֵק:  
 שְׂמוּאֵל א טו:ו

Due to the friendly and helpful behavior of Yitro, the Kenite's ancestor, following the Exodus from Egypt, the Kenites are now warned to separate from the Amalekites.

Once again, the contrast between the Amalekite and Kenite tribes is heightened through the use of shared language:

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 186.

<sup>12</sup> N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, (Schocken: New York 1986), p. 36.

<sup>13</sup> This explanation is based on Rashi's commentary to verse 22. The exact meaning of this verse is obscure. The name *Ashur* might not be referring to Assyria but to a tribe descended from *Keturah*—see Gen. 25:3.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel I chapter 15 serves as the Haftorah for Shabbat Zachor.

Amalekite	Kenite
<p>ב פה אָמַר ה' צָב-אוֹת פְּקֻדָּתַי אֶת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה  עֲמֶלֶק לְיִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר שָׂם לוֹ בְּדַרְדָּר בְּעֵלְתוֹ  מִמִּצְרַיִם:  שְׂמוּאֵל א ט:ב</p> <p><i>Thus said the Lord of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek <b>did to Israel</b>, for the assault he made upon them on the road, <b>on their way up from Egypt</b>.</i>  <b>Sam. I 15:2</b></p>	<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֵּינִי לָכוּ סָרוּ רַדּוּ מִתּוֹךְ עֲמֶלֶקִי פֶן אֶסְפָּף  עִמּוֹ וְאַתֶּם עֹשִׂיתֶם חֶסֶד עִם כָּל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵלְוֹתָם מִמִּצְרַיִם  וַיִּסָּר קֵינִי מִתּוֹךְ עֲמֶלֶק:  שְׂמוּאֵל א ט:ו</p> <p><i>Saul said to the Kenites, "Come, withdraw at once from among the Amalekites, that I may not destroy you along with them; for <b>you showed kindness to all the Israelites when they left Egypt</b>." So the Kenites withdrew from among the Amalekites.</i>  <b>Sam. I 15:6</b></p>

The treacherous attack of the Amalekites is contrasted to the kind behavior of Yitro the Kenite. What Kenite *chesed* is the text referring to? Ostensibly, the text is referring to Yitro's advice to Moshe to appoint judges. Luria proposes an additional *chesed* based on the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides to Num. 10:31. There they note that Yitro guided the Israelites through the desert. Whereas Yitro guided the Israelites while they were on the way, the Amalekites attacked them while they were on the way.<sup>15</sup>

The pairing of the Amalekite and Kenite tribes throughout the Bible emphasizes the fundamental difference in their attitudes to the Children of Israel. From the dawn of Israelite history, Amalek's anti-Israelite behavior stands in stark contrast to Yitro's (Kenites) pro-Israelite behavior.

It was my honor to have known Mr. Herb Smilowitz for over 40 years. He was the epitome of a family man: loving, caring, concerned and supportive of his own immediate family and the family of Israel. Sitting on the board of many Jewish institutions, offering support and donating generously, he certainly was a follower of the Yitro tradition.

<sup>15</sup> *Pirkei De Rebbe Eliezer*, explained by Rabbi David Luria [Hebrew], (Warsaw 1852; Jerusalem 1963), p. 106, n. 9.

# The Meaning of *Ta'anit Esther*

Based on a *sicha* by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein

Rosh Yeshiva, Yeshivat Har Etzion • RIETS '59

Honorary Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS and Honorary Director of the Gruss Institute

Adapted and Translated by R. Dov Karoll, YC '00

The Rambam (*Hilkhot Ta'anivot* 1:4) writes that fast days are designated as times for repentance. In the first chapter, he discusses fasts decreed in a time of distress, during which one should cry out to God:

*This practice is one of the paths of teshuva, for when a difficulty arises and the people cry out [to God] and sound the trumpets, everyone will realize that [the difficulty] occurred because of their evil conduct... and this [realization] will cause the removal of this difficulty.*

## **Hilkhot Ta'anivot 1:2**

If the people attribute the distress to their sinful ways, if they interpret it as a punishment rather than as happenstance, this will help them merit Divine mercy.

In the Rambam's view, this is true not only regarding fasts decreed for a contemporaneous distress, but also for the set fasts of the calendar:

*There are days when the entire Jewish People fast because of the calamities that occurred to them, to arouse [their] hearts and initiate [them in] the paths of teshuva. This will serve as a reminder of our wicked conduct and that of our ancestors, which resembles our present conduct and therefore brought these calamities upon them and upon us. By reminding ourselves of these matters, we will repent and improve [our conduct], as the verse states (Vayikra 26:40), "And they will confess their sin and the sin of their ancestors."*

## **Hilkhot Ta'anivot 5:1**

The Rambam thus speaks of fasts that arise in two contexts: immediate crisis and remembrance of past occurrences. Whether one views *Ta'anit Esther* as a custom or as an actual rabbinic decree, it is clearly rooted in a past remembrance, and the element of *teshuva*, as per chapter 5, should therefore be dominant in its observance.

דבר זה מדרכי התשובה הוא, שבזמן שתבוא צרה ויזעקו עליה ויריעו ידעו הכל שבגלל מעשיהם הרעים הורע להן ... וזה הוא שיגרום להם להסיר הצרה מעליהם.

**הלכות תעניות א:ב**

יש שם ימים שכל ישראל מתענים בהם מפני הצרות שאירעו בהן כדי לעורר הלבבות ולפתוח דרכי התשובה ויהיה זה זכרון למעשינו הרעים ומעשה אבותינו שהיה כמעשינו עתה עד שגרם להם ולנו אותן הצרות, שבזכרון דברים אלו נשוב להיטיב שנאמר (ויקרא כ"ו) והתודו את עונם ואת עון אבותם וגו'.

**הלכות תעניות ה:א**

It is worth noting, however, that while the Rambam emphasizes the need for *teshuva* regarding both types of fasts, the nature of the link to *teshuva* varies between the two. Let us analyze this difference in light of two *parshiot* in the Torah, the two main *parshiot* that speak of a link between times of distress and *teshuva*. One of these is in *Parashat Vayelekh*, in the gloomy forecast that God delivers to Moshe:

*And God said to Moshe: Behold, you shall sleep with your fathers; and this people will rise, and go astray after the foreign gods of the land ... and will forsake Me, and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide My face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them. So that they will say in that day, "Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?" And I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evils which they shall have done, in that they are turned to other gods.*

**Devarim 31:16-18**

טז ויאמר ה' אל משה הנך שכב עם אבותיך וקם העם הזה וזנה אחרי אלהי זכר הארץ אשר הוא בא שמה בקרב ויעזבני והפר את בריתי אשר ברתי אתו: יז וחרה אפי בו ביום ההוא ועזבתים והסתרתני פני מהם והיה לאכל ומצאנהו רעות רבות וצרות ואמר ביום ההוא הלא על פי אין אלהי בקרבי מצאנוי הרעות האלה: יח ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא על כל הרעה אשר עשה כי פנה אל אלהים אחרים: דברים לא: טז-יח

In speaking of the “many evils and troubles shall befall them,” these verses teach us that the appropriate response is to note the relationship between the punishment and the betrayal of God. This is the proper reading of the historical map; the proper perspective lies in seeing a close bond between the trouble that befalls us or threatens us and our way of life. There is nothing more than that here – there is no mention here of *teshuva*, no mention of prayer. Reading the historical map in this manner implies recognition of sin and, apparently, regret for the sinful ways. There must be a corrective turn in order to escape the troubles.

If we turn back to chapter 1 of the Rambam, this question of how the troubles are understood and attributed is central: “Everyone will realize that [the difficulty] occurred because of their evil conduct... and this [realization] will cause the removal of this difficulty” (1:2). The “paths of *teshuva*” described here are primarily the association between the troubles and the sinful ways that brought them about. The Rambam also includes the importance of crying out and fasting as tools to help people appreciate that it is not that “Our God is not among us,” but rather that we have shut the door, thereby enabling this trouble to come upon us, and we can escape it by performing *teshuva*.

Elsewhere in the Torah, this process is described quite differently. In *Parashat Va’etchanan*, in the passage read on Tisha Be-Av morning, the Torah states as follows:

*When you shall father children and grandchildren, and you shall have remained long in the land, and shall corrupt yourselves, and make an engraved image or the likeness of any thing, and shall do evil in the sight of the Lord your God to provoke Him to anger - I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you shall soon completely perish from the land which you are going*

כה כי תוליד בנים ובני בנים ונשנתם בארץ והשתחיתם ועשיתם פסל תמונת כל ועשיתם הרע בעיני ה' אלהיך להכעיסו: כו העידתי בכם היום את השמים ואת הארץ כי אבד תאבדון מהר מעל הארץ אשר אתם עברים את הירדן שמה

over the Jordan to possess; you shall not prolong your days upon it, but shall completely be destroyed. And the Lord shall scatter you among the nations, and you shall be left few in number among the nations, where the Lord shall lead you. And there you shall serve gods, the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. But if from there you shall seek the Lord your God, you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress, and all these things have come upon you, in the latter days, if you turn to the Lord your God, and shall be obedient to his voice.

**Devarim 4:25-30**

לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא תִאָּרְיֵבן יָמִים עָלֶיהָ כִּי  
הַשְׁמִד תִּשְׁמְדוּן: כִּי וְהַפִּיץ ה' אֶתְכֶם  
בְּעַמִּים וּנְשַׁאֲרְתֶם מִתִּי מִסֶּפֶר בְּגוֹיִם  
אֲשֶׁר יִנְהַג ה' אֶתְכֶם שָׁמָּה: כַּח  
וַעֲבַדְתֶם שָׁם אֱלֹהִים מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם  
עֵץ וָאֶבֶן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִרְאוּן וְלֹא  
יִשְׁמְעוּן וְלֹא יֵאָכְלוּן וְלֹא יִרְיָחוּן: כַּט  
וּבְקִשְׁתֶּם מִשָּׁם אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ  
וּמִצְאֹתָ כִּי תִדְרָשׁוּן בְּכֹל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכֹל  
נַפְשְׁךָ: ל בַּצָּר לָךְ וּמִצְאוּךָ כֹּל  
הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּאַחֲרֵית הַיָּמִים  
וְשָׁבַתְּ עַד ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְשָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹלוֹ:  
דְּבָרִים ד:כח-ל

Both the troubles and the response to them are described differently here than they are in *Vayelekh*. In *Vayelekh*, the punishment comes in the form of *hester panim*; God, so to speak, hides His face, causing a disconnect, heaven forefend, between the Almighty and the Jewish People and leading to the false sense among the people that “Our God is not among us.” The account in *Parashat Va’etchanan*, however, differs greatly; what is described in *Va’etchanan*, to use *Chazal’s* phrase, is that “They were exiled to Babylonia, and the Divine Presence went with them” (*Megilla* 29a). *Va’etchanan* discusses exile, which is certainly a troubling reality, but not in the same sense as in *Parashat Vayelekh*, where the bond to God is broken, so to speak. In the latter scenario, there are “many evils and troubles befalling them,” without being relocated, but with an ongoing, existential trouble. And the response on the part of the people is also limited – they merely recognize how they arrived at this problematic position.

In *Parashat Va’etchanan*, on the other hand, the punishment is not as sharp or acute, and the existential problem is more readily overcome: “From there you shall seek out the Lord.” The central issue is not geographic but existential – you can seek Him out from there and find Him. This notion is not mentioned in *Parashat Vayelekh*. To summarize: In *Parashat Vayelekh* the problem is a broken bond with God; this problem can be understood, but the Torah does not describe the bond being reestablished or sought out. In *Parashat Va’etchanan*, however, God Himself can be sought out.

The common denominator between these two *parshiot* is that distress brings about *teshuva* in some form or other. Whereas *teshuva* can come about unrelated to national crisis, these two *parshiot* address *teshuva* that arises out of a difficult situation but constitutes a religious-moral response, a yearning for spiritual growth, growing out of reflection and appreciation of the situation.

When we turn from *Hilkhos Ta’anuyot* to *Hilkhos Teshuva*, we find a different phenomenon: repentance that is not necessarily brought about by external distress. A person sinned, he was aroused spiritually, and performed the various aspects of *teshuva* out of a desire to come closer to God. This is a completely different reality than the ones described above. This type of *teshuva* may develop as a result of failure, but there is a difference between failure and trouble. This is the type of *teshuva* described in the verse, “Return, Israel, to the Lord your God,

for you have stumbled in your iniquity” (*Hoshea* 14:2). The prophet does not proclaim there, “We are in a state of national crisis! Let us perform *teshuva* so we can be saved from it.” Rather, “you have stumbled in your iniquity” – the sin itself is a failure. But there is a path that leads away from failure, a path of introspection, of awakening, of aligning one’s will to the will of God, and thereby improving one’s existence on both the individual and collective level.

Beyond the distinctions outlined above, there is a fundamental difference between *teshuva* that results from punishment and *teshuva* that arises from introspection. On the one hand, if we ask ourselves honestly which *teshuva* has greater passion, greater depth, greater drive, greater hope, which will bring greater *teshuva*, it is clear. Recognizing human nature for what it is, we know that the community unites and turns to God, seeking any means, any path of hope, any solution, to be saved from crisis. It is clear that the *teshuva* emerging from distress, whether of the kind described in *Parashat Vayelekh* or of the kind described in *Parashat Va’etchanan*, will carry greater depth and passion. *Teshuva* that emerges from a person who appreciates that his situation is desperate, that he is in danger – this leads him to recognize that his choice is between life and death, as described in *Parashat Nitzavim* (*Devarim* 30:19), “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life.” It is true that even this recognition requires a religious sensitivity and religious orientation, and the feeling of the “sword pressed to one’s neck” can bring that out passionately.

Although crisis and danger are powerful motivators, *teshuva* that is inspired by love of God achieves a level beyond the level of *teshuva* born of fear. *Chazal* make this point in a number of contexts.

Aside from these two forms of *teshuva* – one arising from immediate distress and one unrelated to distress but rather arising from love of God and truth – there is a third form, to which we have already alluded. It, too, arises from a sense “a sword pressed to one’s neck,” not in the sense of immediate danger but rather from recalling historical precedent – a nation sinned and was punished; they floundered in their religious observance and they suffered. This is the reality of, “They will forsake Me and break My covenant” and the reaction of “I shall hide My face.” The people are not experiencing this reality at the moment – currently they are in no such distress – but they have learned this lesson from history, from remembering the events of the past.

In reflecting on the reality of the Purim story, there are presumably a variety of factors that are relevant for this process. The story is, among other things, a story of sin and *teshuva*. The *megilla* itself does not address this directly, but it emerges between the lines, and *Chazal* emphasized it. A reading of the *megilla* that is sensitive to these issues should note it, whether from Esther’s call, “Go, gather together all the Jews... and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink...” (*Esther* 4:16), or from the attribution, “Because they partook of the feast of that wicked one” (*Megilla* 12a). Whatever the particular explanation, the religious state of the Jewish people at the time led to total destruction being decreed against individual and nation. The *teshuva* which needed to follow needed to take all this into account; this crisis led them to the path of *teshuva*. On the one hand, “Esther was exceedingly distressed,” she underwent personal distress, and on the other hand, the nation underwent great distress and there was communal *teshuva*.

But *Chazal* understood the events of the *megilla* not simply as a means to solve the immediate crisis, via fasting and prayer; they saw the reaction as being one of an overall spiritual uplifting. The *teshuva* is understood not simply as a response to the crisis. Rather, inspired by the crisis, they recognized the perverse culture of Achashverosh's empire – with its perverse sense of priorities and perverse social norms, its sybaritic culture.

While beforehand they may have started to lose their sense of uniqueness, as a result of Haman's decree they caught themselves and realized that there is a Mordechai in the world! "And Mordechai would not kneel or bow" (3:2). There is a proud Jewish identity, with a national and spiritual culture. What are we doing floating around Shushan in this culture of moral impropriety? Is this how we want to live? The crisis was a catalyst, but it was more than that. The passion brought about by the "sharp sword pressed against the neck" led to a search for truth out of an interest in ascent and growth. "The Jews ordained, and took upon themselves, and upon their descendants" (9:27) – this was not a return to the point of departure but rather an ascent and upgrade of spiritual reality.

One who reads the *megilla* senses that there is a drama of danger and salvation, but, at the same time, despite the absence of God's name from the *megilla*, one senses the Divine Presence – it is part of the drama. There is more to the story than is spelled out. Out of fear, the nation recommits itself to God.

There is an inspiring message of *teshuva* in the *megilla*, a lesson that, according to the Rambam's approach in chapter 5, is one of historical recollection. From a certain perspective, they performed *teshuva*, everything was reversed, and they got a new start. We can appreciate the depth of this message, the great lesson of the *megilla*; the nation arose, not militarily, economically or socially, but spiritually.

This is an ancient story, and millennia have passed since that time. But the Rambam in chapter 5 speaks about a time, not when the sword is pressed against one's neck, but when one seems to sit "beside the still waters." Even at this time, one recalls the events of the past to learn the moral lesson of that history, the lesson of *Megillat Esther*. It is a lesson of Jewish survival in exile, after God has scattered the Jews among the nations, a lesson of Jewish presence, Jewish existence, and the challenge of Jewish endurance. But just as the original event was more complex than it first seemed, carrying greater depth and significance, the lesson learned should also be more complex, deeper, and, mainly, more demanding.

Fortunate are we to have merited the return to our land. Fortunate are we to have been freed from the yoke of exile and of foreign rule. Fortunate are we to have been freed from "serving those who serve" other gods. But this is only part of the story. Is this all the *megilla* can teach us – how to endure in exile? Were it only the case that we would not be faced with any more travails and threats! But the lesson of spiritual uplifting, of rising against the spiritual challenges that threaten us and the problematic culture that impinges upon us, should be instructive in helping us improve – both on the individual and collective levels.

If when we read the *megilla* we listen not only with our ears but with our hearts, we hear the remembrances of the past, the "*zakhor*." We can appreciate the remembrance, not only of what

Amalek has done to us, but what we, God forbid, are doing to ourselves. As those who study Torah, we need to feel a sense of responsibility not only for ourselves but for our fellows, for the nation, and toward the Almighty. We must understand that this responsibility means that if you have not improved your surroundings, if this does not stand at the peak of your goals, you are a spiritual egoist. Is it enough merely to work on yourself? Is that called self-improvement? Is that how Avraham Avinu acted? Is that how Moshe Rabbeinu acted? Is that how the Chafetz Chaim acted?

To properly incorporate these lessons, we must strive to achieve *teshuva* and improvement, and with divine compassion and deep introspection appreciate who we are, what we are, who we need to be, and who we want to be.

Thank God we are living in an era of rebuilding, where opportunity abounds for personal and national growth. We need to improve ourselves, but we cannot suffice with that. We need to choose for ourselves lifestyles that will enable us to bring the imprint of the *beit midrash* to the street, to bring the signet of the synagogue, the signet of the truth of Torah, and the remembrance of the past which is part of that reality, to society as a whole. This is the hope of those “who wait upon the Lord,” that they shall “mount up with wings as eagles” (*Yeshayahu* 40:31), seeking to be uplifted, and acting accordingly.

This is an ancient story, with an inspiring message on the one hand, but a demanding one on the other. Its message needs to pervade our consciousness, enrich our service of God, enable us to take those first steps, and continue along that path – for improving ourselves and improving the world. The very core of *teshuva* and its power lies in this yearning: “From there you shall seek the Lord your God, you shall find Him, if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

[*This sicha was delivered on Ta’anit Esther 5769 (2009).*]

# The Origin of *Mishloach Manot*<sup>1</sup>

Rabbi Menachem Penner

Max and Marion Grill Dean, RIETS • Rabbi, Young Israel of Holliswood • RIETS '95

## The Reason for the Mitzvah of *Mishloach Manot*

There are two classic understandings of the *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot*. The author of *Terumat HaDeshen* (*Siman* 111), Rabbi Yisrael Isserlin (Germany, 1390-1460), sees the gifting of food items as a way to ensure that every person has sufficient food for a proper Purim seudah. This would explain why according to the Maharil, *mishloach manot* must be food items that are ready to eat.<sup>2</sup> If the receiver hopes to make use of *mishloach manot* delivered on the morning or afternoon of Purim, the food would need to be precooked in order to be served at the afternoon seudah.

We already find the concept of caring for the poor and needy at times of joy in the Chumash. The Torah tells us with regard to the *Shalosh Regalim*:

*And you shall rejoice before the L-rd your G-d, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow that are in the midst of you, in the place which the L-rd your G-d shall choose to cause His name to dwell there.*

**Devarim 16:11**

וְשִׂמְחֶתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אַתָּה  
וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ  
וְהַלְוִי אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ וְהַגֵּר  
וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאֵלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ  
בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
לִישֹׁן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם.  
**דְּבָרִים טז:יא**

This very concept may have been extended to Purim through the mitzvah of *mishloach manot*.

On the other hand, Rabbi Yehuda ibn Shushan, quoted in the *Manot Halevi* commentary of Rav Shlomo Alkabetz (Tzfat, 1500-1580) on Ester, suggests that the exchanging of gifts serves simply to bring Jews closer to one another. *Mishloach manot* are given—“*ish le'rei' eihu*—from a man to his friend,” as a goodwill gesture to strengthen the bonds between Jews.<sup>3</sup> Jewish unity, in

<sup>1</sup> This article is written *lezeicher nishmat* Mr. Herb Smilowitz, z”l. Herb was a quiet giant of a man who served as Vice Chairman of the RIETS Board of Trustees. As a close friend of his son Mark, I had the *zechut* of knowing Herb from my childhood and was able to see first-hand not just his kindness and generosity, but also the way he led his community and family. May his memory be blessed.

<sup>2</sup> See *Magen Avraham*, 695:11.

<sup>3</sup> For an interesting collection of practical differences between the two opinions, see Mirsky, (Rabbi) Yitzchak, *Hegyonei Halacha*, vol. 1 [Hebrew], pp 261-266. See also, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/purim/pur61-mt.htm> by R. Moshe Taragin of Yeshivat Har Etzion.

his opinion, has a special place in the celebration of Purim; to negate the words of Haman, who called the Jewish people an “*am mefuzar umeforad*,” “a people spread-out and separated [among the nations].” (Ester 3:8) Just as the Jews united in their cities to fight their anti-Semitic enemies (see Ester 9:2), they unite yearly to celebrate their victory.

Each suggestion has its challenges. The *Terumat HaDeshen*'s explanation, that *mishloach manot* help prepare for the Purim meal, seems to set Purim apart from most other holidays. Despite the aforementioned biblical exhortation “to remember the needy during the holidays,” there are few established practices to send food packages before the *yomim tovim*, with the exception perhaps, of the very expensive holiday of Pesach.<sup>4</sup> While we may make an effort to invite the needy to our *yom tov* meals, and we may in particular cases send money for holiday preparation, there is no established practice of sending food portions for *seudot*. Why would Purim *seudah*, a rabbinic innovation, get more attention than the Torah festivals?

Furthermore, if the mitzvah of *mishloach manot* is a form of charity, why don't we make a particular effort to give our *mishloach manot* to the needy? *Maot chitim*, for example, which are distributed before Pesach, are given only to those who need financial help. *Mishloach manot* packages are given to wealthy and poor alike. And while rabbis often encourage their congregants to send *mishloach manot* to less noticed or less popular people in the community, there is no significant effort to direct these packages to the poor.

*Chatam Sofer* (*Orach Chaim* 196 and in notes to the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 695) grapples with this second question of why the wealthy also receive packages, and suggests that *mishloach manot* was established in such a way as to not embarrass those who are actually in need of Purim food. Even the wealthy receive Purim food so as to protect the honor of the needy. This is certainly a worthy goal. However, the practices of singling out the poor for *matanot l'evyonim*, and before Pesach for *maot chitim*, would seem to prove that the need for directed funds trumps the need for the honor of the needy. Is the difference simply between food packages (given to both wealthy and poor) and checks (given only to a poor)?

If we look at *mishloach manot* as more of a community-building measure, many of these questions fall away. If brotherhood is the goal, there is no reason to differentiate between sending packages to the wealthy or the poor. And even if one were to argue that there is a special need to connect with people at different socio-economic strata, one could suggest that *matanot le'evyonim* assures that goodwill is spread not just to “friends” but to those who might be outside of one's social circle.

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<sup>4</sup> We do see one occasion upon which this commandment was fulfilled through the sending of gifts. Toward the end of the Book of Nechemiah, Ezra and Nechemiah gather the returnees to Judea and read to them from the Torah. The people are overcome with sorrow for their sins. It is then that Nechemiah encourages them to celebrate the holiday of Rosh Hashanah nonetheless. “And Nechemiah ... and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said to all the people: ‘This day is holy unto the L-rd your G-d; mourn not, nor weep’ ... Then he said to them: ‘Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our L-rd; neither be grieved; for the joy of the L-rd is your strength’” (Nechemiah 8:9-10). This “sending of portions,” however, did not seem to be a regular practice at the time of the holidays.

However, it is not clear why the goodwill presents to friends need to be food.<sup>5</sup> True, as Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Yechave Daat* 6:45) argues, nothing creates friendship like the sharing of food. Shall we suggest that this goodwill gesture of sending food on a day of feasting is not somehow connected to the mandated feasting of the day?

## The Development of the Purim Holiday

I would like to suggest a novel approach to the development of *mishloach manot* based on a closer look at the development of the holiday as a whole.

The ninth *perek* of Ester describes a multi-stage process through which the holiday of Purim and the *mitzvot* of Purim were established. It is clear that the holiday started as a spontaneous celebration of a military victory and eventually evolved into a formal holiday with proscribed practices. Let's take a look at the relevant *pesukim* from the ninth chapter (verses 16-20):

*And the rest of the Jews who were in the provinces of the king ... and rested on the fourteenth, and made it a day of feasting and joy. But the Jews who were in Shushan ... rested on the fifteenth, and made it a day of feasting and joy. Therefore the Jews of the villages, who dwelled in un-walled towns,<sup>6</sup> would make the fourteenth of the month of Adar a day of joy and feasting and holiday, with the sending of portions to one another. Then Mordechai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Achashveirosh, near and far, to establish for them the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same,<sup>7</sup> year by year, as the days when the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which had been turned for them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and the sending of portions to one another, and gifts to the poor.*

וְשָׂאָר הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּמַדִּינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ ... וְנוֹחַ  
בְּאַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֵׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה  
וְשִׂמְחָה: וְהַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוּשַׁן נִקְהְלוּ  
בַּשְּׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וּבְאַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְנוֹחַ  
בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֵׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה  
וְשִׂמְחָה: עַל כֵּן הַיְהוּדִים הַפְּרוּזִים הֵיטְבִים  
בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת עֲשִׂים אֵת יוֹם אַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר  
לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר שְׂמִיחָה וּמְשֻׁתָּה יוֹם טוֹב וּמְשֻׁלַּח  
מִנּוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ: וַיִּכְתֹּב מֶרְדֵּכַי אֵת הַדְּבָרִים  
הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל כָּל הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר  
בְּכָל מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ הַקְּרוֹבִים  
וְהַרְחוֹקִים: לְקַיֵּם עֲלֵיהֶם לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֵת יוֹם  
אַרְבַּעַה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר וְאֵת יוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר  
בּוֹ כְּכֹל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה: כִּימִים אֲשֶׁר נָחוּ בָהֶם  
הַיְהוּדִים מֵאִיבֵיהֶם וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּד לָהֶם  
מִגּוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֵבֶל לְיוֹם טוֹב לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם  
יְמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה וּמְשֻׁלַּח מִנּוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ  
וּמִתְּנוּת לְאַבְיָנִים:

There seem to be at least three stages in the celebrations following the miracle.

1. The year of the miracle (verses 16-18): The spontaneous celebration included the precursor to the Purim seudah—a day of feasting and joy.
2. The years—we don't know how many—following the miracle (verse 19): The celebrations continued, albeit in perhaps a slightly more muted way (“joy and feasting” instead of “feasting

<sup>5</sup> This is the majority opinion. See *Darkei Moshe* (OC 695:7 and *Mishnah Berurah* SK 20).

<sup>6</sup> See Malbim for an explanation as to why only those in un-walled towns celebrated in subsequent years.

<sup>7</sup> See Malbim and Grossman, Yonatan, *Ester: Megillat Setarim* for explanations as to the significance of Mordechai expanding the holiday to the 15th of Adar.

and joy”). It is not clear what is meant by the “holiday,” although Chazal explain that there was an attempt to establish an *issur melachah*—a prohibition of work—similar to biblical festivals.<sup>8</sup> Finally, there is the introduction of some sort of gift-giving—“*umishloach manot ish le’rei’eihu*.”

3. The official establishment of the holiday through Mordechai (verses 20-22): Mordechai formalizes the ongoing celebrations into a proscribed holiday with *mitzvot miderabbanan*. Mordechai establishes Purim as a part of the yearly calendar with three *mitzvot* (that are mentioned here): the Purim seudah, *mishloach manot* and *matanot l’evyonim*.

Many questions, some similar to those raised earlier, arise from a simple reading of the text:

- What motivated the Jews to begin to give Purim gifts in the years following the miracle? How and why did a yearly commemoration of the miracle lead to the exchange of food?
- Why do the Jews send presents only to their friends (*mishloach manot*) and not to the poor (*matanot l’evyonim*)? Is Mordechai, as a *gadol beYisrael*, simply more sensitive to the needs of the poor? Why didn't those who began to send *mishloach manot* also send *matanot l’evyonim*?
- *Mishloach manot* start at the second stage of the development of Purim and are established into law in “stage three.” Shall we assume that the *ta’am ha-mitzvah*, the rationale behind this practice, remained the same in both stages? Or is it possible that the reason for *mishloach manot* developed along with the changing nature of the holiday?

## A New Explanation of *Mishloach Manot*

It seems that the *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot* evolved as the holiday developed. The practice began along the lines of the explanation of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, but later morphed into a practice motivated by the rationale of the *Sefer Manot HaLevi*.

One can be sure that all Jews celebrated in the first year, in the exciting days of feasting after the war. After a year spent fearing for their very lives, the Jews emerged victorious and safe; their relief and joy could not be contained. However, the celebrations naturally lessened with each passing year. Human nature is such that even very dramatic events quickly fade into the back of our consciousness as we return to our every day challenges.

Furthermore, Purim may have also developed slowly because it was not at all clear that the events described in *Sefer Ester* were the result of Divine intervention. The Purim story is a classic case of a *neis nistar*—a hidden miracle. While it may have been hard for a believing Jew not to see the *Yad Hashem*, there was most certainly a segment of the population who must have thought that the Divine involvement in Shushan and around the empire did not require a new holiday.

Without a doubt, the subsequent “Purims” were thus celebrated differently in different parts of the community—and even in different homes. Some probably tried to keep the original excitement of that first year alive, celebrating at festive meals as they did right after the war. Others certainly let the day go by with lesser levels of celebration.

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<sup>8</sup> See Bavli *Megillah* 5b.

At the core of the celebration was, from the first year and onward, Purim meals—“*yemei mishteh ve-simchah*.” Those who wished to commemorate Purim day and thank G-d for what had happened did so with a celebratory meal. I would suggest that the earliest *mishloach manot* were sent to encourage friends and family to celebrate. The food packages were originally intended, along the lines of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, to serve as the basis of the Purim seudah and *seudot*. They were not sent, however, for people too **poor** to make a Purim meal—rather too **disinterested**. The most religiously sensitive members of the community wanted to assure that Purim was not forgotten and, regardless of whether the rabbis would officially declare the day to be a holiday, wanted their fellow Jews to continue to celebrate the Purim miracle. To encourage their neighbors to remember the miracle—and to thank Hashem—they sent ready-made meals—or at least the basics of meals—so that there would be no reasons or excuses to forgo “Purim day.”

Once Mordechai established Purim as an official holiday, and in what we are calling “stage three,” the Purim seudah was legislated like any other *mitzvah midrabbanan*. On some level, the grass-roots effort to distribute Purim food had accomplished its goal. While every mitzvah, and especially a new *mitzvah midrabbanan*, needs *chizuk* (strengthening), the original purpose of *mishloach manot* was no longer truly necessary. No longer did people need to encourage their neighbors to mark the day. Chazal had stepped in.

But the giving of *mishloach manot* continued. The practice of sending gifts had already become a beloved part of the holiday. The *chachamim* included this practice as one of the *mitzvot* of Purim—but no longer as an outreach tool. What then, was the purpose of continuing this practice?

Now, in “stage three,” we can look to the *Terumat Hadeshen* and Rav Alkabetz. People were making Purim *seudot* anyway—but some couldn’t afford it. *Mishloach manot* assured that everyone could make the seudah. While *mishloach manot* may not have been invented to help the needy—for we don’t find this practice before most *yomim tovim*—the popular custom was continued to help the poor (and perhaps given to the wealthy to protect the honor of the poor). It is noteworthy that at this point Mordechai established another mitzvah, *matanot l’evyonim*, to assure that even the needy could properly celebrate Purim with a seudah.

Alternatively, the purpose of *mishloach manot* may have changed in a fundamental way after the *takanah* of the Purim seudah was in place. Now, the beloved *mishloach manot* custom would be continued as a way to allow Jews to connect with one another.

In summary, I would suggest that the *Terumat HaDeshen’s* suggestion—that *mishloach manot* are given to provide food for the Purim seudah—was certainly the case with the earliest packages that were shared. However, they were given as an outreach tool—not merely as an act of holiday-related *tzedakah*. Once the holiday of Purim was accepted by all, the practice of *mishloach manot* was maintained either as *tzedakah* or as an act of brotherly love, much in line with the explanation quoted in the *Sefer Manot HaLevi*.

# The Meaning of *Mishlo'ach Manot*

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*In memory of my dear father, Herbert Smilowitz z"l*

What is the thematic connection between *mishlo'ach manot* (sending tributes) and the story of Purim? *Mishlo'ach manot* appears in the Megillah without explanation. *Matanot la'evyonim* (gifts to the poor) is easier to explain. It may relate to a general mandate to support those who cannot afford their own festive meal during a holiday (see Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Festivals, 6:18).<sup>1</sup> But it is not immediately apparent what purpose is filled by *mishlo'ach manot*, exchanging food items with friends and neighbors who have no particular need for them.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that the answer to the question can be found in the opening chapter of the Megillah. It is initially unclear why so much detail of Achashveirosh's party is recorded. Of course, the general description of that party is necessary for the narrative, as it provides the motive for deposing queen Vashti, opening a spot for Esther to fill as the new queen. Still, the amount of detail as to the lavishness of the party seems at first glance to be superfluous.

*White, green, and blue, hangings, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble: the beds were of gold and silver, upon a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, marble.*

**Esther 1:6**

חור כרפס ותכלת אָחוּזוּ בְּחַבְלֵי בּוּץ  
וְאַרְגָּמָן עַל גְּלִילֵי כֶסֶף וְעַמּוּדֵי שֵׁשׁ מְטוֹת  
זָהָב וְכֶסֶף עַל רִצְפַת בְּהַט וְשֵׁשׁ וְדָר  
וְסִתְרֹת.  
אֶסְתֵּר א':ו

On a purely literary level, this description highlights the lengths to which Achashveirosh went in order to display his marvelous collection of material goods and comfort items. In fact, Achashveirosh's attitude toward material wealth is a significant theme of this chapter.

*He showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, even one hundred and eighty days.*

**Esther 1:4**

בְּהִרְאֹתוֹ אֶת עֲשָׂר כְּבוֹד מְלְכוּתוֹ וְאֶת יְקָר  
תְּפָאֲרַת גְּדוּלָתוֹ יָמִים רַבִּים שְׁמוֹנִים  
וּמְאָת יוֹם.  
אֶסְתֵּר א':ד

<sup>1</sup> See Harav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, *Harerei Kedem*, volume 1. Jerusalem 5760. p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> For alternative approaches to the one suggested here, see R. Mordechai Torczyner, "The Joy of Giving," and R. Josh Flug, "The Relationship between Mishlo'ach Manot and Matanot La'Evyonim," both in *Purim To-Go 5772*.

As described here, the purpose of the party was to allow Achashveirosh to show off his wealth. In Achashveirosh's worldview, the primary purpose of wealth is to revel in it, to enjoy it. Apparently, in this initial chapter, the Megillah seeks not only to portray the events leading to Esther's appointment, but also to paint a picture of a personality type, embodied by Achashverosh, of one who has surrounded himself with material goods for the sake of pride and pleasure.

Why is this portrayal important to the story? A closer look at the Megillah reveals that the question of attitude to material wealth is in fact a significant theme. Two additional attitudes toward material wealth are depicted, one by Haman, and the other by Mordechai and Esther.

Before analyzing these characters and their views on material goods, allow me to somewhat digress in order to introduce a framework within which to understand them. I would like to suggest that the different attitudes towards wealth in the Megillah reflect three fundamentally different attitudes regarding the nature of man.

In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Viktor Frankl develops his view of human psychology based on the principle that man's most basic drive is to find meaning in life. He calls his meaning-based therapy logotherapy, after the Greek term *logos*, which denotes "meaning." He contrasts his view with the views of Alfred Adler and Sigmund Freud as follows:

*According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one's life is the primary motivational force in man. That is why I speak of a **will to meaning** in contrast to the pleasure principle (or, as we could also term it, the **will to pleasure**) on which Freudian psychoanalysis is centered, as well as in contrast to the **will to power** on which Adlerian psychology, using the term "striving for superiority," is focused.<sup>3</sup>*

Frankl notes that his meaning-based psychology has come to be known as "The Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy." These three schools represent three different views of man. For Freud, man's most basic need is pleasure, for Adler it is power, and for Frankl it is meaning. It should be clear that Adler's and Freud's conceptions are self-centered, whereas Frankl's is much more in tune with a religious worldview.

It is possible that Megillat Esther was already aware of these three perspectives on human nature, as they are embodied by the characters Achashveirosh, Haman, and the couple Mordechai and Esther, especially in their respective relationships to material wealth. We have already dealt with Achashveirosh, for whom the Freudian pleasure principle is primary, as reflected in the way he used his riches, not to mention his excessive sexual indulgences in chapter two.

For Haman, wealth was a means to power and domination. Unlike his king who would waste his riches on showy parties and conspicuous consumption, Haman put his wealth to pragmatic use.

*If it pleases the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed: and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the hands of those that have the charge of the business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.*

**Esther 3:9**

אם על המלך טוב יכתב לאבדן  
ועשרת אלפים כפר כסף  
אשקול על ידי עשי המלאכה  
להביא אל גנזי המלך.  
אסתר ג:ט

<sup>3</sup> Frankl, Viktor (1959). *Man's search for meaning*. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press. p. 154.

Haman, apparently a man of means, offers to pay the expenses of the extermination operation. Further coverage of those expenses are expected from the spoils of the Jewish victims, as he says, "*ushlalam lavoz*," that "their spoils shall be taken" (Esther 3:13). That Haman is obsessed with power is further evident from the demand that everyone bow to him, as well as from his doomed imaginings that the king has chosen him for special honors. Haman, the Adlerian man of power, views the amassment of wealth as primarily a means to defeat and dominate his enemy.

Mordechai and Esther represent a stark break from the previous two worldviews. How did they view material riches? Under their leadership, the Jews were careful to refrain from taking the spoils of their would-be slaughterers. "*U'vabiza lo shalchu et yadam*," that "they did not touch the spoils," is an ongoing refrain of chapter nine, blatantly contrasting Haman's plan to collect the Jews' spoils.

Why not take the spoils of our enemy? After all, the Torah does not generally prohibit doing so in the case of a just war. Apparently, the attitudes of Achashveirosh and Haman were not mere individual traits, but permeated the atmosphere of society at large. Mordechai and Esther felt that the need of the hour was to teach a third attitude toward material wealth, that is, that wealth brings with it not only privileges and self-satisfaction, but obligations as well. Mordechai and Esther's worldview, in consonance with Frankl's approach, sees man's accomplishments as a way to transcend the self by focusing on more lofty, meaningful, aims.

Mordechai and Esther themselves did not have a taste for wealth. In chapter two, the girls of the kingdom appear before the king after beautifying themselves with whatever jewelry and adornments they might desire. "*Kol asher tomar yinaten lah*"; "whatever she would ask for she would be given" (Esther 2:13). Yet when it is Esther's turn to appear, "*lo vikshah davar*," "She asked for nothing" (Esther 2:15). As for Mordechai, after he is paraded through the city in royal garb to celebrate his commitment to the king's wellbeing, we are told:

*And Mordechai returned to the king's gate*  
**Esther 6:12**

*Rashi: "And Mordechai returned"—to his sackcloth and fasting.*

וַיָּשָׁב מֶרְדֵּכָי אֶל שַׁעַר הַמְּלָכָה.  
**אֶסְתֵּר ו' י"ב**

רש"י: "וישב מרדכי" – לשקו ולתעניתו.

Rashi spells it out, but even without Rashi one can almost feel the speed with which Mordechai strips himself of his fancy adornments as soon as the procession ceremony is over, returning to his simple sackcloth and to his mission to save the Jews.

It is in within this framework that *mishlo'ach manot* and *matanot la'evyonim* take on a new meaning. They become the counter-measure to Achashverosh's celebration of self-indulgence. The lavish descriptions of Achashveirosh's party, rather than a mere embellishment, become a starting point of a journey from one world view to another. Jews celebrating their victory by giving things away is the antidote to the poisonous atmosphere of self-indulgence created by Achashveirosh's example.

Lest we make the mistake to think that Achashveirosh's excesses were his personal problem alone, our Sages point out that the Jews of the time partook of his celebration, and that this was considered a grave offense.

*Rabbi Shimon's students asked him, why did the Jews of that generation deserve destruction? He said to them: You tell me. They said to him, because they took pleasure in the feast of that wicked man.*

**Megillah 12a**

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחאי: מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל שבאותו הדור כליה? אמר להם: אמרו אתם! - אמרו לו: מפני שנהנו מסעודתו של אותו רשע.  
מגילה יב.

This midrash appears in different versions in different places. Although in this version R. Shimon rejects his students' position, in other versions that position is maintained. But this version is noteworthy for the verb used to describe the violation. Note the use of the word *ne'henu*, "took pleasure." They could have used a simpler alternative, the verb *achlu*, "ate." In fact, in one parallel midrash, R. Shimon bar Yochai suggests that the Jews of the time were worthy of destruction because "they ate from food cooked by non-Jews" (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Esther, 247:1048). But the formulation in *Masechet Megillah* indicates that it was the pleasure-seeking, not the eating itself, that had made the Jews vulnerable to destruction. It is unusual to attach a death penalty to forbidden foods, especially for a rabbinic level prohibition such as eating food prepared by a non-Jew. But adopting a poisonous culture of pleasure-seeking that threatens to undermine the very foundations of Torah-based values seems more likely a foundation for the threat of destruction. That would seem to be the thrust of the following *midrash*, where the position that it was Jewish participation in Achashveirosh's feast that triggered Haman's plot is in fact maintained:

*R. Yishmael said, 18,500 [Jews] went to the feast and ate, drank, got drunk and became corrupted. Immediately, Satan stood up and informed on them before God, and said, Master of the World, how long will You attach Yourself to this people, for they set their hearts and their faith apart from You. Don't you want to destroy this people from the world? For they do not approach you with penitence.*

**Esther Rabbah 7:13**

א"ר ישמעאל שמונה עשר אלף וחמש מאות הלכו לבית המשתה ואכלו ושתו ונשתכרו ונתקלקלו, מיד עמד שטן והלשין עליהם לפני הקב"ה ואמר לפניו, רבונו של עולם עד מתי תדבק באומה זו שהם מפרישין לבבם ואמונתם ממך, אם רצונך אבד אומה זו מן העולם, כי אינם באים בתשובה לפניך.  
אסתר רבה ז:יג

In this midrash and in similar ones in its vicinity in *Esther Rabbah*, it is the state of the people's hearts, an anti-spiritual attitude of self-indulgence, and not the technical violation of this or that prohibition, which the Sages hold responsible for setting into motion the wheels of divine retribution, culminating in the rise of Haman and the threat of destruction.

There is a biblical, and not only midrashic, basis for the assertion that many Jews at Mordechai and Esther's time were infected with a self-centered attitude towards wealth. The prophecies of Chaggai and Malachi are from the same era as the Esther story, and there is even an attempt to identify Mordechai and Malachi as one and the same person (*Megillah 15a*). Chaggai and

Malachi both rebuke the Jews of their time for keeping their best material goods to themselves instead of putting them to use in the rebuilding of the Temple and the enhancing of its service. Consider this objection of Chaggai:

*Is this an appropriate time for you to sit in your ceiled houses, when this house [the Temple] is in ruins?*

**Chaggai 1:4**

העת לָכֶם אַתֶּם לְשֹׁבֵת בְּבֵתֵיכֶם סְפוּנִים  
וְהַבַּיִת הַזֶּה חָרַב:  
חגי א:ד

Or this protest of Malachi:

*You offer on My altar defiled food, yet you say, "How have we defiled You?" By your saying, "God's table is contemptible." When you offer a blind [animal] for a sacrifice, is there nothing wrong? And when you offer a lame or a sick one, is there nothing wrong?*

**Malachi 1:7-8**

מְגִישִׁים עַל מִזְבְּחִי לֶחֶם מְגָאֵל  
וְאַמְרֹתֵם בְּפִמֹּה גְאֻלְנוּדָה בְּאַמְרֹתְכֶם  
שְׁלַחַן ה' נִבְזָה הוּא: וְכִי תִגְשׁוּן  
עוֹר לְזִבְחָה אֵין רָע? וְכִי תִגְיִשׁוּ  
פֶסֶחַ וְחֻלָּה אֵין רָע?  
מלאכי א:ז-ח

It seems that during the exile many Jewish people had become accustomed to keeping the best of their comforts to themselves and giving only low-quality, token donations toward religious causes.

In light of all the above, the mitzvot of *mishloach manot* and *matanot la'evyonim* can be viewed as an act of repentance for participation in the feast of Achashveirosh. In a broader sense, they signal an endeavor to transform Jewish society from a culture of consumption to a culture of giving. The reason that the charitable giving of *matanot la'evyonim* did not suffice to mark this transformation is that charity towards the poor can be interpreted in utilitarian terms, in terms of fulfilling a societal need. Even secular people talk about the redistribution of wealth in order to form a more just and healthy society. Were everyone to have enough, there would no longer be any secular reason to give. But Judaism believes in *hatken atzmecha* (Avot 4:16), improving the self, not only *tikun olam*, improving the world. To fully repair the damage created by exposure to Achashveirosh-styled self-indulgence, we need to practice giving even to people who have no blatant need. We each must cultivate a giving personality. We must break out of the habit of focusing only on ourselves and our own comfort. And so we give to our friends and neighbors regardless of their financial status. This giving is meant to battle not poverty, but self-centeredness. When it comes to general charity, the amount I must give is defined as *dei mach'soro*, in terms of how much the poor person needs. When it comes to giving *mishlo'ach manot*, it is possible that the opposite is true. According to some *poskim*, it is a person's own financial status that determines how much he must give for *mishlo'ach manot*.<sup>4</sup>

In general, in Judaism there are two kinds of giving: giving whose focus is uplifting the recipient, and giving whose purpose is ennobling the giver. This fact has been noted, for example, regarding the midrash cited by Rashi which says that Avraham was troubled when there were no travelers to receive his hospitality, so God conjured up three of them in the form of angels (see

<sup>4</sup> See Rav Ovadyah Yosef, "Me'hilchot uminhagei Purim," *Kol Sinai*, gilyon 6, volume 2, Adar 5723, p. 160. Rav Soloveitchik in *Hararei Kedem* (see note 1 above) applies this rule to *matanot laevyonim* as well.

Rashi on Bereishit 18:1). As Rabbi Walter Wurzburger notes, “Far from rejoicing that nobody needed his assistance, he actually bemoaned his lack of opportunity to practice philanthropy.”<sup>5</sup> More than people needed his hospitality, Avraham needed to be hospitable. Sometimes it is the cultivation of excellent personal character traits, and not only helping someone in trouble, that is the purpose of giving. It is in this spirit that the mitzvah of *mishlo’ach manot* can be understood.

Words cannot properly express the deep gratitude I feel toward my father ז”ל for the model he provided me and my family of the giving personality. Having succeeded in building, together with his father and brother, a booming business out of nothing, my father interpreted his success as an opportunity and obligation to give and provide. He saw himself as a steward given charge by the *Ribono Shel Olam* to support Torah institutions, such as Yeshiva University, Yeshivat Har Etzion, his own synagogue and community in West Orange, and others. He not only provided material support, but gave generously of his time and his venerated wisdom. But his giving was not only other-directed; it was all-pervasive in his character. Full of love, humility, and goodwill, he cultivated a giving personality. A senior business colleague cited my father’s kindness and humility as shaping the culture of their company. I am told that whenever an employee in the company was not suited to his position, rather than dismissing him, my father would find the employee another role in the business.

As hard as he worked in his business and for his community, we, his family, were his greatest beneficiaries. When Gloria, Rachel and I were kids our father was home every night for dinner, took us on weekend and holiday trips, and played with us. He continued to lovingly guide us in adulthood. For his grandchildren, he could be both a playmate and a guiding light. Whenever anyone needed something around the house, he would jump up out of the comfort of his chair and offer assistance, whether for a family member or visitor. Remarkably, even into his eighties, he insisted on carrying our luggage whenever we visited. Not only did he give what people needed, he also needed to give. Like our ancestor Avraham, he was happiest when providing. While he is sorely missed, he leaves behind a legacy of sterling character for us to emulate.

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<sup>5</sup> Wurzburger, W. S. (1994). *Ethics of responsibility: pluralistic approaches to covenantal ethics*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society. p. 64. For more about the dual nature of Jewish giving, giving to fill a need and giving to build character, see chapters 3, 4, and 5 of Rabbi Wurzburger’s book.

# The Intrigue Behind Mordechai's Approval Rating

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At a rabbinic conference a number of years ago, the rabbis present were asked to identify their greatest frustration in their role as rabbi. One younger rabbi in the group, who had only been in the rabbinate for a few years, spoke about his personal struggle in feeling that, there are some congregants “who he knew” were not fond of him. Some of the participants suggested that the rabbi go out of his way to engage those particular congregants and make them into his fans. The leader of the group discussion then pointed out that his frustration was common to those who are in leadership positions, and that the rabbi needed to get accustomed to it. When one is a rabbi, or serving in any leadership position, there will always be those who are critical of the leader. Noting the last verse of Megillat Esther, that even Mordechai Hatzadik was not loved by all, the rabbi was asked “and you think you should be?”

The verse states:

*For Mordechai the Jew was a minister for King Achashveirosh, a great man among the Jews, and pleasant to most of his brothers. A man who sought good for his nation and advocated peace for all of his people.*

**Esther 10:3**

כִּי מֵרַדְּכַי הַיְהוּדִי מְשֻׁנָּה לְמַלְכָּה  
אֶחָשְׁוֵרוּשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיְהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרַב  
אָחִיו דָּרַשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ וְדִבֵּר שְׁלוֹם  
לְכָל־יְרֵעָיו.  
אִסְתֵּר י:ג

The words “*v’ratzuy lero v echav*, pleasant to most of his brothers” are deeply troubling. After all that Mordechai did in saving the Jews who lived in the kingdom of Achashveirosh, he remained with only a majority approval rating. There were Jews who were not fond of Mordechai! How could that be? Not too long before, they and their families were facing death at the hands of Haman and his counterparts. It was Mordechai’s courageous leadership in advising Esther that led to the survival of these people. What part of the story are we missing? What was their dislike of Mordechai at this point in the Purim story all about?

The Alshich offers two approaches to the final pasuk of the Megilla that will hopefully give us insight into this perplexing difficulty. The first approach contrasts Mordechai with another

member of the Sanhedrin, Menachem who is discussed in *Masechet Chagigah* (16b). There was a respected rabbinic leader named Menachem at the time of Hillel and Shamai. Menachem was to become the Av Beit Din of the Sanhedrin together with Hillel when he suddenly left the Sanhedrin and Shamai filled his place. The Gemara wonders where he went and offers two opinions. Abaye's opinion is that Menachem went off the path of Torah. Rava, however, suggests that Menachem left the Sanhedrin to serve the king. The Gemara suggests a third opinion, similar to that of Rava, that Menachem went to serve the king and took with him eighty students that wore the special royal clothing. The Alshich points out that in most cases when a person is appointed to such a prestigious position as minister to the king, they tend to forget the other relationships that were important to them, even their own people. Positions of power often test the ethics and morals of the most valued and respected members of society. Mordechai was unique. He not only remained a member of the Sanhedrin, he didn't act differently towards his people once he assumed his new position. Because he remained a *dayan* (judge), he didn't have a 100% approval rating. Naturally, when one loses a case in court there is no love lost for the individual toward the judge who ruled against them. It is for this reason that the Megilla records that some were unhappy with Mordechai.

This approach can be seen clearly by looking at the verse. The verse opens with the word *ki*. The Gemara, *Gittin* 90a, teaches that the word *ki* has a number of different meanings. The word *ki* can be translated as despite (see Ibn Ezra to Bereishit 48:14 explaining כִּי מִנְשֵׂה הַבְּכוֹר). In this context, we would read the verse, "Despite [the fact that] Mordechai the Jew was a minister for King Achashveirosh, [he was] a great man among the Jews." He did not turn his back or leave the Sanhedrin.

The Alshich uses his approach to explain the rest of the verse. Mordechai was "*ratzuy l'rov echav*." He found favor with most of his brothers, but not all of them, since he continued to serve as a judge and some of those who he ruled against felt a sense of ill will towards the judge of their case. The Alshich notes that if a judge is loved by all people, it is a sign that he is avoiding making difficult, but just decisions. He continued to serve as a *dayan* despite his royal position. He was seen as a great representative among the righteous who appreciated what he was doing (*doresh tov l'amo*, he sought good for his nation) and he sought peace for the entire Jewish people (*dover shalom l'chol zaro*, he advocated peace for all of his people), even those who were critical of him.

The Alshich's second approach to this verse is based on the concept that prominence and stature is dangerous for righteous people. The concern is that the righteous would become haughty and act favorably toward their own family members while distancing themselves from the good people that they were previously engaged with. In this regard, Mordechai was a true *tzaddik*, uncorrupted by his prominence and stature. He saw his role as minister to the king as being for the people, not about him as an individual, or his personal greatness. To Mordechai, there was no inherent value to being a minister for a non-Jewish king. He was a "*gadol layehudim*"—great among the Jews because they recognized this fact about him. He saw his role as simply representing the Jewish people but not enjoying his role for personal gain. Those Jews who were connected to Jewish values were able to appreciate Mordechai's approach to his role as minister. Why then were there those who were not happy with Mordechai? The Alshich suggests that

there were some members of his tribe, the tribe of Binyamin that were disappointed with him because they wanted him to show them preferential treatment. Instead he was “*doresh tov l’amo*,” he sought the good of all of his people and sought peace “*l’chol zaro*,” for all Jews, even those from his tribe who disliked him.

This edition of Torah To-Go is dedicated to our dear friend and my beloved congregant Herbert Smilowitz z”l, upon the occasion of his first yahrtzeit. Herb was a true *mensch* in every sense. What impressed me most about Herb was not only that he was always one of the first in shul on Shabbos mornings, but his character and *menschlichkeit* were spectacular. Like Mordechai Hatzaddik, Herb had great success in life but was one of the most humble people that I knew. This is not only my observation of Herb, it has been shared by many if not all who knew him. His love of Yeshiva and RIETS, as well as his respect for the rabbinate was truly exemplary. He was a communal leader par excellence and a great advocate for Torah and Medinat Yisrael. May his *neshama* have an *aliyah* and may he serve as a *maylitz yosher* (advocate on high) for his wife Marilyn and his family.



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