

The Meaning of *Mishlo'ach Manot*

Rabbi Mark Smilowitz

Faculty, YTA Girls' High School in Jerusalem • RIETS '02

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).¹ 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.²

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 בְּהַטּ 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

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

² 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.³*

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

³ 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 לְכֶם 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 וְחֻלְיָה 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*.⁴

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

⁴ 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.”⁵ 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 *Ribbono 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.

⁵ 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.