

Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary
Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

THE BENJAMIN AND ROSE BERGER
TORAH TO-GO®

Established by Rabbi Hyman and Ann Arbesfeld

March 2017 • Purim 5777

A SPECIAL EDITION IN HONOR OF THE
RABBI ISAAC ELCHANAN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Chag HaSemikhah 5777

CELEBRATING THE NEXT
GENERATION OF RABBINIC LEADERS



Dedicated in loving memory of Phyllis Pollack

לע"נ פעשא יטא בת יהודה ז"ל

by Dr. Meir and Deborah Pollack

Aliza, Racheli, Atara, Yoni, Ilana and Ari

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Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

500 West 185th Street, Suite 419, New York, NY 10033 • office@yutorah.org • 212.960.0074

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Introduction

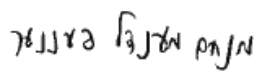
It is with great excitement that we present to you this special edition of the Benjamin and Rose Berger Purim To-Go in conjunction with the celebration of the RIETS Chag HaSemikhah taking place on Sunday, March 19th, 2017, the 21st of Adar 5777. The opportunities for Jewish communal engagement have never been broader, and the challenges to the continuity and vibrancy of the Jewish people have never been greater. The Musmakhim of RIETS are refined Torah scholars who appreciate the complexity

of the contemporary Jewish world. They have been taught, trained, and empowered to educate, and lead the next generation of our community.

This special edition of Torah to Go pays tribute to this milestone by sharing Torah insights from scholars of Yeshiva University, and some of the recent musmakhim themselves. Please join us, as we wish our musmakhim זמרי חזק ואמץ in their journey to inspire the future of the Jewish people.



Rabbi Dr. Kenneth Brander
Vice President for University and
Community Life, Yeshiva University



Rabbi Menachem Penner
Max and Marion Grill Dean,
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary



Rabbi Yaakov Glasser
David Mitzner Dean,
YU Center for the Jewish Future

THE RIETS SEMIKHAH PROGRAM

The Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik Semikhah Program offers a four-year program of Torah study, professional training and fieldwork. Talmidim develop expertise in Talmudic study while surveying a breadth of halakhic topics unmatched in the world of yeshivot.

Kollelim

Kollel programs allow students to devote all their energies to the study of Talmud and halakha. Each program is designed for students with distinct educational goals, whether in Jewish education, the synagogue rabbinate, Jewish scholarship or other pursuits both in and out of Avodat Hakodesh.

- **The Marcos and Adina Katz Kollel** for prospective teachers and rabbinic scholars, led by Rabbi Hershel Schachter.
- **The Rabbi Norman Lamm Kollel L'Hora'ah (Yadin Yadin)** to train scholars for the role of poskim, led by Rabbis J. David Bleich, Yona Reiss and Mordechai Willig.
- **The Ludwig Jesselson Chaver Kollel** for those with a background in Talmud planning to enter other professions.
- **The Bella and Harry Wexner Kollel Elyon** combines intensive Torah learning with courses in professional skills, led by Rabbi Mordechai Willig.
- **The Israel Henry Beren Institute for Higher Talmudic Studies (Hamachon Ha-Gavohah Le'Talmud)** for scholars who will become future roshei yeshiva

and Jewish educators, led by Rabbi Michael Rosensweig.

- **The YU RIETS Israel Kollel in Jerusalem** for chaver, semikhah and post-semikhah students, led by Rabbi Dovid Miller.

- **Community kollelim** give our rabbinical students an opportunity to engage in communal learning, and year-round kollelim in Chicago and Toronto reach thousands of people with a plethora of classes and dynamic programs.

- **The Rabbi Jacob H. Kupietzky Memorial Program for the Study of Kodshim** for post-semichah study of the texts and concepts of the Talmudic order of Kodshim not generally covered in the regular semicha studies curriculum, led by Rabbi David Horwitz.



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Chag Hasemikhah 5777

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Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary:

The Soul of Yeshiva University

Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary has been the soul of Yeshiva University for more than 120 years. Sounds of learning vibrate through the *batei midrashot* and resonate from morning until late at night.

RIETS educates and trains rabbis who have shaped and continue to shape our Jewish world. Combining the highest levels of Torah learning in the legacy of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik zt”l, an unmatched program of professional preparation for the rabbinate and an impassioned commitment to impact the Jewish community, RIETS continues to produce the finest rabbinic leadership for the next generation and beyond. Our musmakhim fulfill their destiny as vital links in the chain that continues to transmit rabbinic knowledge and tradition from one generation of Jewish leaders to the next.

The moving and profound ceremony of the Chag HaSemikhah recognizes the promise of our rabbinic graduates and the achievements of all alumni of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary who have assumed responsibility for the future of the Jewish people. It officially marks the completion of RIETS’ rigorous four-year graduate program of Torah learning and comprehensive professional training for the rabbinate.

Established in 1886, RIETS’s more than 5,000 musmakhim serve the worldwide Jewish community in the Torah Umadda tradition that is Yeshiva University. RIETS was named after Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Spektor (1817–96), a revered sage and spokesman for world Jewry. After his death in 1896, RIETS was named in his memory.

In 1915, Dr. Bernard Revel was appointed president and Rosh Yeshiva of RIETS. After Dr. Revel’s death in 1940, Dr. Samuel Belkin (1911–76), a young, prominent RIETS Rosh Yeshiva and a noted scholar, was named dean of the seminary; in 1943, he was elected president of the institution then known as “RIETS and

Yeshiva College.” Dr. Norman Lamm was elected president and Rosh HaYeshiva in 1976—the first who was American-born—following Dr. Belkin’s death that year. A musmakh of RIETS, Dr. Lamm is an alumnus of Yeshiva College and the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Jewish Studies, where he earned his PhD.

Under the visionary leadership and guidance of Richard M. Joel, the president of YU and RIETS, RIETS’ impact is felt in the Jewish community throughout the world. RIETS musmakhim occupy an overwhelming number of pulpits throughout North America, as well as major educational, communal-professional and lay leadership positions.



As the Western Hemisphere’s leading center for Torah learning and training for the rabbinate, RIETS provides exceptional training for students entering the various fields of Avodat HaKodesh in the contemporary Orthodox community. The Rabbinic Professional Education program, R-PEP, is the product of a bold, successful strategic planning initiative launched in 2002 by the RIETS Board of Trustees. The program, outlined on the next page, is aimed at producing the most well-trained, emotionally intelligent rabbinic professionals in the history of the Jewish community.

RIETS musmakhim maintain their engagement with the Yeshiva through the Center for the Jewish Future’s continuing Rabbinic education programming, and career and placement services. RIETS

musmakhim lead and inspire our community through serving in some of the most influential and prestigious pulpits throughout North America. Our musmakhim also continue to grow professionally through the myriad of programs that provide the most current perspectives and insights into halachic and pastoral guidance.

Many great and influential rabbis have taught at RIETS. Among the most illustrious Gedolei Torah was Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, a scholar, philosopher and teacher who had a profound impact on Jewish thought. A leading authority and exponent of Halakhah, he was appointed rosh yeshiva at RIETS in 1941. Rabbi Soloveitchik was familiarly known as “the Rav;” he had the legendary power to deliver unparalleled discourses spanning the Talmud, Jewish law, philosophy and contemporary issues.

“We have an unparalleled faculty of Roshei Yeshiva,” said Rabbi Menachem Penner, Max and Marion Grill dean of RIETS and a RIETS musmakh. “Our learning tradition is a direct continuation of the Talmud Torah at the classical European yeshivot thanks to the strong foundation laid by one of my predecessors, Rabbi Zevulun Charlop.” Rabbi Charlop presided over a period of enormous growth at the seminary for more than 35 years and now serves as dean emeritus of RIETS and special adviser to the University president on yeshiva affairs.

The seminary has benefited greatly from the construction of the Jacob and Dreizel Glueck Center for Jewish Study, which houses a two-story, 550 seat beit medrash, as well as numerous classrooms and offices utilized by RIETS administration, students and Roshei Yeshiva.

In an increasingly complex world, RIETS accepts the challenge to prepare its students to face the multifarious issues of today’s society—anchored always in the sacred legacy of our Torah and people.

Professional Rabbinics at RIETS

The most comprehensive professional rabbinics training of any seminary or semikhah program, offering advanced professional tracks for students entering into community synagogues, college campuses, education and outreach work.

Comprehensive curriculum includes

- Survey of Professional Opportunities
- Public Speaking
- Homiletics
- Adult Education
- Pastoral Psychology
- Contemporary Issues in the Jewish Community
- The Life and Career of the Rabbi
- Practical Rabbinics

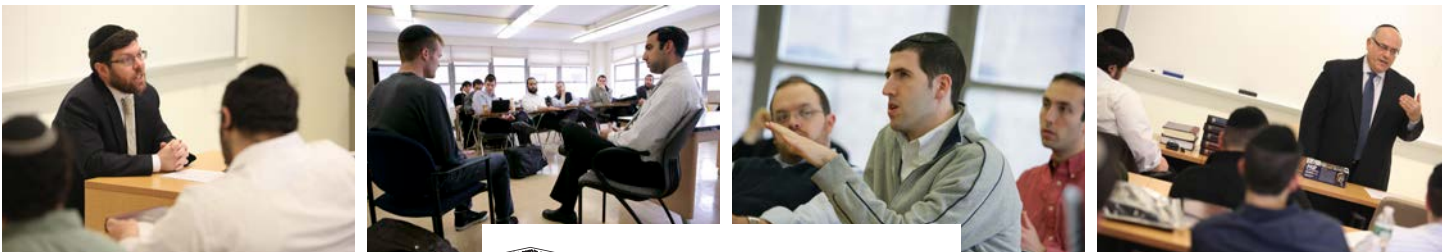
Highlights include

- Presentations by and continued interaction between students and distinguished community leaders
- Contemporary issues: Comprehensive presentations and guided group discussions of major communal and social issues of the day
- Advanced Pastoral Psychology course, including role playing with professional actors

- Joint RIETS-Ferkauf Graduate Program in Mental Health Counseling, providing graduate mental health training to future synagogue rabbis

The Rabbinic Personal Development Program at RIETS includes

- Individual and group work for three years of semicha
- Testing to determine strengths and weaknesses
- Courses on emotional intelligence
- Processing groups led by experienced mental health professionals
- Life and Career: Real discussions about stressors, the rabbinic family confidentiality and more
- Career counseling, guidance and placement



ישיבת רבנו יצחק אלחנן
Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary
An Affiliate of Yeshiva University



The Menahel and the Manhig: Two Models of Leadership

Celebrating the Chag HaSemikhah of the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary gives us an opportunity to consider the extraordinary contribution that the musmachim of RIETS have made in leading the Jewish people. Our Yeshiva prides itself on ensuring that every graduate is fundamentally an accomplished talmid chacham. In addition, each student has received exceptional training, mentorship, and guidance in the practical dimensions of rabbinic leadership. RIETS continues to engage our musmachim through their personal relationships with RIETS roshei yeshiva, which endure long beyond the years spent in the beis midrash, and through the continued rabbinic education that is offered to our alumni throughout their careers. It is often the musmachim of RIETS who find themselves at the forefront of confronting major communal issues that impact not only the larger YU community, but the Jewish people as a whole. As a rav, one is often called upon to provide perspective and guidance, and occasionally take unpopular public positions in the pursuit of propelling our community forward in its development as *ovdei Hashem*.

As the Torah relates the unfolding narrative of the Jewish people, we are presented with many models of leadership, and are often exposed to the struggles and achievements that are



Rabbi Yaakov Glasser

David Mitzner Dean, YU Center for the Jewish Future
Rabbi, Young Israel of Passaic-Clifton

invariably associated with providing a principled path for communal development. Perhaps one of the most challenging moments of leadership that we encounter throughout the Torah, and the episode with the most far-reaching consequences, is the mission of the *meraglim*. The Torah describes the stature of the individuals selected to represent the Jewish people in exploring the landscape of our intended destination — Eretz Yisrael:

וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה מִמִּדְבַּר פָּארָן עַל פִּי ה' כָּלָם
אֲנָשִׁים רָאשֵׁי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֵמָּה.

And Moshe sent them from the desert of Paran based on the commandment of G-d, they were all [distinguished] men, heads of the Jewish people.

Bamidbar 13:3

The Torah describes the reaction of the people upon hearing the report of the *meraglim*:

וַתִּשָּׂא כָּל הָעֵדָה וַיִּתְּנוּ אֶת קוֹלָם וַיִּכְבּוּ הָעָם
בְּלִילָהּ הַהוּא. וַיִּלְנוּ עַל מֹשֶׁה וְעַל אֶהֱרֹן כָּל בְּנֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם כָּל הָעֵדָה לוֹ מִתְּנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ
מִצְרַיִם אוֹ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לוֹ מִתְּנוּ. וְלָמָּה ה'
מֵבִיא אֹתָנוּ אֶל הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְנַפֵּל בַּחֶרֶב נָשִׁינוּ
וְנִסְפְּנוּ וַיְהִי לָבוֹז הַלּוֹא טוֹב לָנוּ שׁוּב מִצְרָיִם.
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִישׁ אֶל אָחִיו נָתַנָּה רֹאשׁ וְנִשׁוּבָה
מִצְרָיִם.

And the whole congregation lifted up their voice, and the nation cried that night. And they complained against Moshe and against Aharon; and the whole congregation said to them: "If we only had died in the land of Egypt! Or if we only had died in this wilderness! And why is G-d bringing us to this land to die by sword, our wives and children will be taken captive, isn't it better for us to return to Egypt?" And each one said to his brother, "Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt."

Bamidbar 14:1-4

The Jewish people react with a national panic that reflects an underlying lack of faith in Hakadosh Baruch Hu; they are ultimately sentenced to remain in the desert, while the next generation will enter the Land of Israel. The commentators struggle with many aspects of this story. A generation that had been emancipated from Egypt, crossed the Yam Suf, survived the theological crisis of the *cheit ha'egel*, seems to be undone by the report of the *meraglim*. What caused this breakdown in leadership?

R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, in his *Liferakim* (pp. 122-125), poses a

simple question: The attribute that we treasure most in our leaders is integrity. Why would G-d hold the *meraglim* accountable for reporting precisely what they saw? They were insightful and sophisticated people. In their judgment, the enemies of the land were indeed formidable, and posed an existential threat to the Jewish people. What exactly was expected of the *meraglim* in this scenario?

R. Weinberg suggests that there are two types of leaders. The first is what R. Weinberg describes as a “*menahel*.” A *menahel* is a modality of leadership that relates to the practical and concrete dynamics of governance. It consists of the cycle of “cause and effect” that needs to be taken into account when assessing a situation for formulating a responsible approach. The *menahel* excels at the managerial and administrative elements of leadership, the tasks necessary to maintain the steady, consistent, and reliable

character of the entity that he leads. However, there is a second category as well, and that is the “*manhig*.” The *manhig* views the landscape of reality and recognizes the compelling need to transcend it. The *manhig* is a risk taker, suggesting ideas that are often impractical. The *manhig* is a visionary who can see beyond the constraints of practicality. The *manhig* recognizes that not all situations in life should be met with a reasonable and deliberate response — sometimes a bold and ambitious approach is necessary to propel the people forward.

The *meraglim* were at fault for deploying the *menahel* mode of leadership when the moment called for a *manhig*. The Jewish people, standing at the precipice of entering the Land of Israel, required leadership that saw beyond the “here and now.” It required a bold declaration — “*aloh naaleh*,” let us go up, the declaration stated by Kalev (Bamidbar 13:30). The *meraglim* were supposed to

express a commitment to transcend whatever challenges were before us and lead the people into their homeland.

There are moments that require the leadership of the *menahel*. They require a measured and steady approach to guiding our communities in their growth in commitment to Torah and mitzvos. Yet there are other moments that call for the *manhig* — the bold vision that at first seems nearly impossible, but with exceptional inspiration and leadership can emerge as a reality. Those who live entirely in the realm of the *menahel* restrain our community’s capacity to aspire for greatness. Those who reside exclusively in the domain of the *manhig* ignore the day-to-day challenges that frame our constant struggle to achieve meaning and purpose in our lives.

In Megillas Esther we encounter this very dynamic in the metamorphosis of Esther’s leadership. As Mordechai

YU Center for the Jewish Future Rabbinic Services

Morris and Gertrude Bienenfeld Department of Jewish Career Development and Placement

Access to professionals who aid institutions with the search process, management and mentorship of rabbis and Jewish communal professionals throughout North America and beyond.

Contact Rabbi Ronald Schwarzbarg at rschwarz@yu.edu.

Rabbis Yarchei Kallah

Conduct retreats for rabbis designed to stimulate, strengthen and sharpen the participants’ preaching, pastoral, programming and teaching skills. The primary mentor in this program is Rabbi Jacob J. Schacter. Conversations on management skills and balance between the home-work relationship is also part of the presentations.

Contact Rabbi Dr. Jacob J. Schacter at jschacte@yu.edu.

Rabbanan.org Rabbinic Resource Website

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becomes more aware of the threatening decrees against the Jewish people and the precarious nature of their standing in the Persian kingdom, he relays to Esther that the time has come to beseech the king for the salvation of her people:

ואת-פתשגן כתב-הדת אשר-נתן בשושן להשמידם, נתן לו — להראות את-אסתר ולהגיד לה; ולצוות עליה, לבוא אל-המלך להתחנן-לו ולבקש מלפניו — על-עמה. ויבוא, התך; ויגד לאסתר, את דברי מרדכי.

He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people. Hathach came and delivered Mordechai's message to Esther

Esther 4:8-9

Esther relays back to Mordechai that such a request is impractical. There are protocols and procedures in the kingdom in order to engage the king. Essentially, Esther makes the rational case for incremental and cautious engagement, outlining the risk of angering the king, which would result in her own demise.

ותאמר אסתר להתך, ותצוהו אל-מרדכי. כל-עבדי המלך ועם-מדינות המלך ידעים, אשר כל-איש ואשה אשר יבוא-אל-המלך אל-החצר הפנימית אשר לא-יקרא אחת דתו להמית, לבד מאשר יושיט-לו המלך את-שרביט הזהב, וחייה; ואני, לא נקראתי לבוא אל-המלך — זה, שלוש ימים. ויגידו למרדכי, את דברי אסתר.

Esther told Hathach to take back to Mordechai the following reply: "All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to

him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days." Mordechai was told what Esther had said.

Esther 4:10-12

Mordechai's reaction to Esther's apprehension is to convey the magnitude of responsibility that rests on her shoulders. Mordechai doesn't address her specific concerns, and instead begins to speak to Esther's personal disposition as a leader. Mordechai explains that Esther must recognize that there are moments that call for incremental and thoughtful consideration, and others that demand action:

יג ויאמר מרדכי, להשיב אל-אסתר: אל-תדמי בנפשך, להמלט בית-המלך מכל-היהודים. יד כי אם-החוש תחרישי, בעת הזאת--רוח והצלח יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר, ואת ובית-אביך תאבדו; ומי יודע — אם-לעת קזאת, הנעת למלכות. טו ותאמר אסתר, להשיב אל-מרדכי. טז לך כנוס את-כל-היהודים הנמצאים בשושן, וצומו עלי ואל-תאכלו ואל-תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום — גם-אני ונערתי, אצום כן; ובכן אבוא אל-המלך, אשר לא-כדת, וכאשר אבדתי, אבדתי. יז ויעבר, מרדכי; ויעש, ככל אשר-צוהו עליו אסתר.

Mordechai had this message delivered to Esther: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordechai: "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law;

and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" So Mordechai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.

Esther 4:13-17

Esther's initial reaction was one of *hanhalah*. It is Mordechai's inspiration that transitions her outlook and disposition to one of *hanhaga*. Esther begins to recognize that if she is waiting for the ideal opening to address her concerns, it may be too late. Esther summons the courage to move forward in a most illogical and nearly irresponsible manner — ultimately asserting herself as a *manhiga* — and saving the Jewish people.

The musmachim of RIETS are entrusted with the sacred role of providing leadership for the Jewish community. Fundamentally, that is an obligation to approach the institutions and organizations of our community within a grounded and realistic framework of a *menahel*. From officiating lifecycle events to teaching Torah, these rabbis search for every opportunity imaginable to provide the support and love for our constituents, and elevate the spiritual vitality of our community. However, there are issues that face our community, which when assessed from an analytical perspective, seem insurmountable. These are moments that demand a *manhig*, someone who stands up and says "*aloh naaleh*." Someone who provides creative, ambitious, and relentless leadership in addressing the challenges of our generation. Our musmachim have a responsibility to avoid the pessimism that often percolates about the future of our community. They must be a source of optimism and hope in projecting a path forward to secure the future of our people.

Open to Embracing Jews; Open to Embracing the Mesorah

Transcribed from Rabbi Penner's address to the 5774 Chag HaSemikhah

My dear musmakhim:
It is such an exciting day
in such a historic time.
It's not just the Chag HaSemikhah.
It's the time we live in. It's תשע"ד, —
one of the most exciting eras in our
history. Dramatic growth of talmud
Torah and the world of the yeshivos.
Strong *kehillos* and thriving *mosdos*,
both in Eretz Yisrael—in Eretz Yisrael
after millennia of *galus*!—and around
the world. What an exciting time for
Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan.
What an exciting time for you to
become rabbanim!

And yet, תשע"ד, is a time of uncertainty
and immense challenge. You, our
precious talmidim, live in a rapidly
changing world and in a Jewish
community struggling to define itself
and grappling to find the Ribbono shel
Olam in an increasingly G-dless world.

With your permission, I would like to
travel to another such time in Jewish
history. For just a moment, come with
me to Eretz Yisrael, to Yerushalayim,
in the years before the miracles of
Chanukah:

It was a time of terrible confusion
after the death of the *gadol hador*,
Antigonus ish Socho. Two of his
students, Tzadok and Baytus, had
begun a process that would lead to
the questioning of the very basics
of our faith. *Ikkarei ha'emunah*, once



Rabbi Menachem Penner

Max and Marion Grill Dean, RIETS

taken for granted, were under attack.
Antiochus IV governed Eretz Yisrael,
looking to force his subjects to adopt
the worldview of Yavan, and to
abandon their own. It was the days
before the miracles of Chanukah,
when so many struggled to see the
invisible hand of the Ribbono Shel
Olam. And when young men and
women, including bnei Torah from
the most established Torah homes,
were disappearing into a sea of
assimilation.

Yes. It was a time very much like our
own.

But it was more than a time of
questioning and it was more than
a crisis of assimilation. There was a
frightening vacuum of leadership.
Hellenized *kohanim gedolim*,
manhigim who lacked the basic
credentials to serve in their posts,
held sway over much of the nation.
So many *kohanim*, once looked to for
hora'ah, had adopted the ways of the
Greeks. And it seemed that no one
towering rabbinic figure and no one
rabbinic body could carry the mantle
of Torah leadership. Two men—a pair,

a “zug”—would henceforth be needed
to stand in the place where one *gadol
hador* had led.

Those two chakhamim were Rabbi
Yosi ben Yoezer of Tzereida and Rabbi
Yosi ben Yochanan of Yerushalayim.
Their sayings, mishnayos in *Avos* (1:4-
5), are famous. But to fully appreciate
them, we need to consider the
challenges that their generations faced
and the radically different solutions
that these two gedolim proposed:

יוסי בן יועזר איש צרדה אומר: יהי ביתך בית
לחכמים

Make your homes gathering places for
talmidei chakhamim. To do so, create
homes where the most righteous
will feel comfortable. Then, fill those
batim, and your *batei kenesiyot*, with
those who want to learn, to daven, to
follow closely and unquestioningly in
the ways of Chazal.

והוי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם

Then, attach yourselves to the sages.
Walk in the ways of your rebbeim with
modesty and awe. Understand your
place vis-a-vis the guardians of the
mesorah.

And soak in their teachings. Be *mechazeik* yourselves, for you will need much fortitude to stand up to the winds of change. Redouble your efforts to find Torah clarity in a world of confusion. Create a safe haven in your homes in a world filled with darkness and falsehood.

Divrei chokhmah, no doubt, in challenging times. Surround yourselves with fellow *ma'aminim*—in fact with those who are on a higher *madreigah* than you. Follow in the footsteps of those who grew up in simpler times and whose lives are guided by the timeless *chokhmas haTorah*.

It's hard to argue with such an approach. But someone did. A second *gadol BeYisrael* suggested a radically different path for the preservation of klal Yisrael. He presented a vision of the home open not only to the *chakhamim*—but to the masses as well. And not just open. Open wide.

Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan, the Av Beis Din, warned that times of uncertainty, when assimilation is at its highest, are not the time for erecting walls, not even protective fences. Instead, those who held to the *eitz hachaim* with every ounce of their strength had a *chiyuv* to connect with the people. And not just to reach out to them and to teach them, but to sit with them, to listen to them, to hear their concerns and to reaffirm the unity of klal Yisrael.

[יוסי בן יוחנן איש ירושלים אומר] יהי ביתך פתוח לרוחה

Open your houses wide! And if I might add to his words, open your *batei kneisiyos* wide as well. Invite in the people, *amkha*. Make them feel welcome, respected and loved—regardless of who they are.

And let those who are poor—not just *aniyim mamash*, but those who form the lower strata of society, uneducated and unsophisticated as they may be—live among you. Become as familiar with the needs of your *kehillah*, your congregational family, as you are familiar with the needs of your nuclear family.

Two Reb Yosi's. Two mishnayos. Two solutions.

An approach of *yirah*—*yiras Shamayim*—protecting ourselves and our precious *mesorah*.

[Be] open to exposing people to the beauty of yiddishkeit without insisting that they become just like you.

An approach of *ahavah*—*ahavas Yisrael*—embracing others, our precious brothers and sisters.

My Dear talmidim:

The Jewish world in which you will serve beyond the *koslei hayeshiva* is thriving and strong—but no less challenging and no less confusing as the one that faced these two *gedolim* in Hellenistic times.

We, too, live in a rapidly changing world in which the very principles upon which our Torah lives are fashioned are under daily attack. An *olam hafuch*—but not the one seen by Rav Yosef brei d'reb Yehoshua in *masekhes Pesachim* (50a). In our upside-down world, morality is close-mindedness and immorality is righteousness. Truth is passé and lies

are welcomed—and sometimes even printed—with enthusiasm. We live in a *bein hashemashos*, an historic time, part *kodesh*, part *chol*, but filled with *irbuvia*, with confusion.

And we have two mishnayos to guide us. We need to study these mishnayos well. But perhaps, most of all, we must remember that they are best understood as two parts of one whole. I don't believe that the *derekh* of Rabbi Yosi ben Yoezer—the creation of homes filled with *tzidkus* but, by their nature, somewhat intimidating and foreign to the uneducated—can sufficiently meet the challenges of today. **There are just too many people, precious *neshamos*, not just among the world of the unaffiliated, but among day school and yeshiva high school and, yes, even Yeshiva University graduates who will be left behind.** Nor do I think that Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan's openness alone, filling our homes with so many common folk that *chakhamim* are left without a seat at the table, is what Chazal were looking to create. These two beautiful mishnayos understood together, these two ideals expressed side by side, with each aspect pursued with passion and *yiras shamayim* need to guide you as the leaders of tomorrow.

"Yehei beiskha pasu'ach lirvachah."

You need to be open. Yes—you heard me correctly. Orthodox Judaism needs to be and can be open. *Pasu'ach lirvachah* to the Jewish people.

You must be open to Jews of different backgrounds, understanding that each precious *neshamah* needs special attention and a unique path to connect to Hashem. You must be open to the opinions of those with whom you disagree, open to explaining the truth, the totality of the Torah, to those

whose worldview has been shaped by outside influences. You must be open to examining our time-honored institutions and considering new ideas and approaches. And, perhaps more than anything else, open to exposing people to the beauty of yiddishkeit without insisting that they become just like you.

You, the musmakhim of RIETS, need to be open if you hope to lead a generation that desires, and will sometimes insist, that its *manhigim* listen as frequently as they speak, accept as often as they judge and innovate as often as they walk in the ways of their ancestors.

And, barukh Hashem, we are open, and you are open—open to learn, to grow, to listen, to devote your lives to klal Yisrael. Open to leaving New York! Open to work on secular college campuses with students who did not receive the gift of a YU education. Open to teach in day schools, in every grade and to every type of student. Open to make a kiddush Hashem in your hospitals and law firms.

Open to put the needs of klal Yisrael before your own.

You are open to lead all of klal Yisrael *bederekh haTorah*.

But not every door and every window can be left open during a storm. As open as you must be, you must never leave our precious *mesorah* exposed, out in the open. When something is precious, precious and yet so fragile, a precious gift for which so many have given their lives to transmit to you, you must protect it and guard it with every fiber of your being.

Don't underestimate your role as a link in the chain of the *mesorah*.

משה קבל תורה מסיני, ומסרה ליהושע, ויהושע לזקנים, וזקנים לנביאים. ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה.

And they, through the *chakhmei hamesorah* passed it to your *rebbeim*, those on this stage. And today, they pass it to you.

יהי ביתך ועד לחכמים

You must assure that your *batim*—not just your homes, but your *batei knessiyos*, and your *batei sefer*, resound with the *kolos* and the spirit of your *rabbeim*. They must be open and exposed to the *gedolei Yisrael*.

הווי מתאבק בעפר רגליהם

Struggle with your *rebbeim* for answers—*ויאבק איש עמו*—but never cease to look to them for guidance.

הווי שותה בצמא את דבריהם:

Continue to learn from the *chakhmei hamesorah* who sit beside me and behind me—through phone calls, through listening to their *shiurim* from afar and *iy"H*, through many visits back to the *batei medrash* in which you grew to become talmidei chakhamim, rabbanim and *manhigei Yisrael* yourselves. אשרינו מה טוב חלקינו to have these people in our lives.

There are many yeshivos and many young men today studying for semikhah. But you are unique—because Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan is unique. **There is no other institution that better represents the ideals expressed by Rabbi Yosi ben Yoezer and Rabbi Yosi ben Yochanan together.** Please don't forget how special you are and what you, and possibly only you, can accomplish.

We believe in you and what we say to others about you. You are grounded in Torah and tradition. And you are ready to lead. It is a daunting task that lies before you. But it is a thrilling time to step onto the stage of Jewish leadership. There has never been a group better prepared and more open to meet this challenge.

Chazak ve'ematz. Mazal tov.



The Chag HaSemikhah celebration includes a dedication of a sefer Torah in honor of Moreinu HaRav Hershel Schachter, shlit"a. This article discusses the various ways that a Jew, and specifically a Torah scholar, is compared to a walking sefer Torah. Rav Schachter embodies this ideal through his scholarship, his refined *middos* and his care and concern for all of klal Yisrael.

A Walking Sefer Torah¹

A sefer Torah (Torah scroll) embodies holiness and we relate to it as a holy object. We stand up in its presence, we kiss it when it passes us and we provide a proper way to escort the sefer Torah as it moves from place to place.

Additionally, we protect it from acts that are not befitting of a holy object: we store it in an upright position, we make sure that it is never placed on the floor and when the Torah is no longer usable, we provide it with a proper burial.

In this article, we will explore the notion that each and every Jew represents a walking sefer Torah. This idea, which is alluded to in a number of Talmudic statements, was developed by a number of commentators.

The Talmudic Sources

The most explicit source comparing a Jew to a sefer Torah is found in two places in the Talmud in a statement by R. Shimon ben Elazar. In the midst of a discussion about when one tears one's garments over death or other tragic events, the Talmud states:

רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר העומד על המת בשעת יציאת נשמה חייב לקרוע למה זה דומה לספר תורה שנשרף שחייב לקרוע. מועד קטן כה.

R. Shimon ben Elazar states: If someone is present when a person dies, he is



Rabbi Joshua Flug

Director of Torah Research,

Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

obligated to tear (his garments). What is this similar to? It is similar to a sefer Torah that was burned, where there is (also) an obligation to tear (one's garments).

Mo'ed Katan 25a

The Talmud clearly compares the loss of an individual to the burning of a sefer Torah.² The commentators offer a number of explanations as to why a person is comparable to a sefer Torah. The most poignant explanation is offered by Ramban (Nachmanides 1194-1270), who states:

ולי נראה שהנפש בגוף כאזכרות בגיילין, ומשל בעלמא הוא לומר שהוא הפסד גדול וחרדה רבה וחייב אדם לקרוע עליה כאילו נשרף ס"ת לפניו. רמב"ן מועד קטן כה.

It seems to me that the soul in the body is like the names of G-d (written) on the parchment. It is merely a parable to convey the message that it is a great loss and cause for alarm and a person must tear his garments as if a sefer Torah was burned before him.

Ramban, Mo'ed Katan 25a

All parts of a sefer Torah are holy.

However, it is the names of G-d that are written in the sefer Torah that infuse the entire sefer Torah with its holiness.³ If we follow the analogy, the entire body is holy and should be treated with holiness. The body is infused with holiness when the soul enters the body.

R. Yosef Shaul Nathanson, *Divrei Sha'ul* 340:5, notes that there is a story recorded in the Talmud about how the Romans killed R. Chanina ben Tradyon that supports Ramban's analogy:

מצאוהו לרבי חנינא בן תרדיון שהיה יושב ועוסק בתורה ומקהיל קהלות ברבים וס"ת מונח לו בחיקו הביאוהו וכרכוהו בס"ת והקיפוהו בחבילי זמורות והציתו בהן את האור והביאו ספוגין של צמר ושראום במים והניחום על לבו כדי שלא תצא נשמתו מהרה אמרה לו בתו אבא אראך בכך אמר לה אילמלי אני נשרפתי לבדי היה הדבר קשה לי עכשיו שאני נשרף וס"ת עמי מי שמבקש עלבונה של ס"ת הוא יבקש עלבוני אמרו לו תלמידיו רבי מה אתה רואה אמר להן גליון נשרפין ואותיות פורחות אף אתה פתח פיק ותכנס [בך] האש אמר להן מוטב שיטלנה מי שנתנה ואל יחבל הוא בעצמו. עבודה זרה יח.

They found R. Chanina ben Tradyon who was sitting and learning Torah and gathering crowds publicly, and there was a sefer Torah in his arms. They took him and wrapped him in the sefer Torah, surrounded him with branches and lit the branches. They brought sponges of cotton, soaked them in water and placed them on his heart so that he would not die quickly. His daughter said "Father, this is how I should see you?" He said to her "If they only burned me, it would be difficult for me. Now that I am being burned with a sefer Torah, He Who will seek retribution for the desecration of the sefer Torah will also seek retribution for my desecration." His students asked him "Rebbi, what do you see?" He said to them "The parchments are being burned, but the letters are flying away." [They said to him] "You too should open your mouth and allow the fire to enter you." He responded "It is better that the one who placed it remove it, but one may not destroy himself."

Avoda Zara 18a

Maharasha ad loc., explains further:

וא"ל תלמידיו מה אתה רואה כ' שהם ודאי ג"כ ראו כן אבל שאלו על כך כדי לתת לו דמיון שלא יצטער כל כך וימות מהר וזה שאמר[ו] לו כי כמו שראית גליון נשרף שהן גוף הס"ת והרוחני שהם האותיות פורחות למעלה אף אתה עשה כן פתח פיו ויכנס האש ויהיה גופך נשרף אף בפנים ונשמתך והרוח שבך יהיה עולה ופורח למעלה מהרש"א עבודה זרה יח.

The students asked him "what do you see" etc., they also saw the same thing, but they inquired about it to give him perspective so that he wouldn't cause himself more suffering, but rather allow himself to die quicker. Their message was that just as you see the parchment burning which is the physical embodiment of the Torah, but the spiritual (essence) which are the letters, are flying up, so too, you should

open your mouth and allow the fire to enter so that your body will be burned internally and your soul will ascend and fly upward.

Avoda Zara 18a

R. Nathanson notes that the dialogue between R. Chanina ben Tradyon and his students (according to Maharsha's interpretation) is based on the assumption developed by Ramban that a person is comparable to the parchment of a sefer Torah and the soul is comparable to the letters.

R. Moshe Sofer notes a halachic ramification of the comparison of a person to a sefer Torah. The Gemara states:

אמר מר זוטרא מטפחות ספרים שבלו עושין אותן תכריכין למת מצוה וזו היא גניזתן. מגילה כו:

Mar Zutra stated: The worn out covers of the Sifrei Torah are converted to burial shrouds for a neglected corpse⁴ and that is their proper disposal.

Megillah 26b

R. Sofer wonders why it is permissible to use the cover, which is imbued with holiness, for a seemingly mundane act: He writes:

דהרי צריך להבין מאי טעמא התירו לעשות מטפחות תכריכין למת מצוה, נהי שזו היא גניזתן, מ"מ תשמיש קדושה, איך ישתמשו בו חול. וצ"ל דהאי נמי תשמישי קדושה, דאדם ישראל הוי כס"ת. חתם סופר מגילה כו:

One must understand why they allowed using covers for burial shrouds for a neglected corpse. Granted that this is the method of disposal, nevertheless, they are still accessories of holiness and how can one use them for the mundane? One must conclude that the corpse is also considered an accessory of holiness because a Jewish person is compared to a sefer Torah.

Chatam Sofer, Megillah 26b

According to R. Sofer, a person can be treated as an accessory of holiness (*tashmish kedusha*) for certain purposes. R. Yosef D. Soloveitchik of Brisk (1820-1892) adds that when a person reaches a certain level, he is not simply treated as an accessory of holiness, but rather as an actual object of holiness:

דהת"ח לא הוי בבחינת תשמיש קדושה רק בבחינת עצם הקדושה. הקדמה לשו"ת בית הלוי

A Torah scholar is not categorized as an accessory of holiness but rather as actual kedusha.

Introduction to Teshuvot Beit HaLevi

R. Soloveitchik's comments give a deeper insight into a statement of the Gemara:

אמר רבא כמה טפשאי שאר אינשי דקיימי מקמי ספר תורה ולא קיימי מקמי גברא רבה מכות כב:

Rava stated: How foolish are people who stand up for a sefer Torah but don't stand up for a great person.

Makkot 22b

There is a verse in the Torah (Vayikra 19:32) stating that one must show honor to a Torah scholar by standing up for him. Rava doesn't understand why people would choose to stand for a sefer Torah, but not for a Torah scholar. One can question Rava's statement: If we are all compared to a sefer Torah, why should these people be motivated to specifically honor a Torah scholar on the basis that he is compared to a sefer Torah? Why is there any special honor due to a Torah scholar on the basis that he is comparable to a sefer Torah?

Based on the comments of R. Soloveitchik, one can answer that there are two levels where one can

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be compared to a sefer Torah. On a basic level, every Jew is compared to a sefer Torah, but as an accessory of holiness. Just as we don't stand up when the cover for a sefer Torah is brought into the room, there is no obligation to stand for every individual. However, a Torah scholar is compared to a sefer Torah on a level where he is considered an actual object of holiness. For this reason, Rava questioned the logic of those who stand for a sefer Torah because of its status as an object of holiness and not for a Torah scholar who attains the same level of holiness.

There are many other allusions in the rabbinic sources comparing a Jew to a sefer Torah. In the next few sections, we will explore some of those comparisons and what we can learn from them.

Relating to Ourselves as Sifrei Torah

Viewing ourselves as representations of sifrei Torah bears a certain responsibility. R. Yechezkel Levenstein (1895-1974) notes that we must treat our minds as if they are sifrei Torah:

ועד כמה שצריך לשמור על השכל, חייבים לקדש אותו כקדושת ספר תורה, כיון שהשכל באמת כספר תורה ממש ... ואם האדם משתמש בשכלו לדבר הבאי דומה הוא לזורק ספר תורה לרחוב, השכל קדוש הוא וחייב להיות מקודש למטרה שלשמו נברא, להבין ולהשכיל בתורה ומצוות ולהוביל את האדם למטרת חייו ואושרו הקיים והנצחי.

*As much as we must guard our mind,
we must sanctify it with the holiness of
a sefer Torah since the mind is truly like
an actual sefer Torah ... If a person
uses his mind for nonsense it is similar
to throwing a sefer Torah into the
street. The mind is holy and it must be*

dedicated to the purpose for which it was created — to understand and internalize the Torah and the mitzvot and to lead a person to a purposeful life and to everlasting and eternal happiness.

Collection of Talks of R. Yechezkel Levenstein (as recorded in *Chochmat HaMatzpun*, Vol. 16, p 303)

There are a number of components included in using our *seichel* (mind) properly. First, there is the intellectual component. G-d gave humans the intellectual capacity to understand, analyze, reason, imagine, and solve problems. We are expected to do our part and use our intellect in a way that reflects that we represent a *sefer Torah*. Second, there is a behavioral component. G-d gave us the ability to choose between right and wrong, between good and evil. We are expected to make choices that reflect our status as walking *sifrei Torah*. This is not limited to choosing to perform mitzvot. It also includes choices to improve our character traits.

The Preparation Process of a Sefer Torah

Rabbi Yosef D. Soloveitchik (1903-1993)⁵ comments that just as producing a *sefer Torah* requires a certain process, developing oneself as a Jew requires a certain process. He notes that there is an interesting comparison between the preparation process of a *sefer Torah* and the development of a person during childhood and adolescence. There are two stages to the process of producing a *sefer Torah*. The first stage is called *ibud*, processing, where the skin of the animal is softened in order to prepare it for writing. The next stage is the actual writing of the *sefer Torah*.

Rabbi Soloveitchik remarks that there

are two mitzvot that relate to the development of a child. First, there is the mitzvah of *chinuch*, training. This mitzvah only applies before the child's bar/bat mitzvah. The second mitzvah is the mitzvah of talmud Torah. This mitzvah does not only include the intellectual pursuit of learning Torah, it also includes the study of how to perform mitzvot, the study of the fundamentals of faith and participating in an educational program that leads one to become a G-d fearing Jew. Regarding this mitzvah, the father's obligation does not stop at bar/bat mitzvah. Rather it continues until the young adult can take responsibility for his/her own education.

The *chinuch* stage is a preparation for the talmud Torah stage. Just as one cannot write on a *sefer Torah* if the skin is not softened and purified, a child cannot become fully engaged in the talmud Torah process until he is softened and purified. His character traits must be refined, he must learn certain skills and he must be acquainted with the basic concepts of Judaism.

R. Soloveitchik also notes that a *sefer Torah* does not acquire its holiness automatically. The *sofer* (scribe) who prepares the *sefer Torah* must imbue the Torah with holiness. In applying our analogy to a person, we are left with the following paradox: If a person is compared to a *sefer Torah*, he must imbue himself with holiness. However, if he is not already imbued with holiness, how can he impart holiness onto himself? Where does the holiness come from?

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggests that each person is born with a certain internal holiness. Each person has a responsibility to transfer that holiness so that it is apparent externally.

Rabbi Soloveitchik comments that this idea appears in the laws of writing a *sefer Torah*:

צריך שיהיה לפניו ספר אחר שיעתיק ממנו
שאסור לכתוב אות אחת שלא מן הכתב
וצריך שיקרא כל תיבה בפיו קודם שיכתבנה.
שלחן ערוך יורה דעה רע"ב

The sofer must have another sefer Torah (or its text) in front of him to copy from for it is forbidden to write a single letter by heart and he must recite each word orally before writing.

Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 274:2

When the *sofer* recites the words that he is writing, it symbolizes the transference of holiness from the internal to the external.

The Letters of the Torah

A number of Kabbalistic and Chasidic sources present a variation to the idea that a person is a walking *sefer Torah*. According to this variation, the Jewish people as a whole are representative of a *sefer Torah*, with each person comprising one letter. The acronym used to express this is:

ישראל = יש ששים ריבוא אותיות לתורה.

Israel= There are 600,000 letters in the Torah.

The number 600,000 represents the entire Jewish people. The Jewish people as a whole is compared to a Torah which also has 600,000 letters.⁶

The Radomsker Rebbe (R. Shlomo Chanoch HaKohen Rabinowitz, 1801-1866) suggests that one of the messages we can derive from this idea is how we treat our fellow Jew. His suggestion is based on the concept of *mukaf'g'vil*, the concept that dictates that every letter of the *sefer Torah* must be surrounded by parchment on all

sides. Therefore, if two letters touch each other, the entire sefer Torah is invalid.⁷

The Radomsker Rebbe writes:

כי כל הס"ת שיש בה ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה הם משורש ששים רבוא נשמות בנ"י שעמדו על הר סיני ומהם נעשה התורה כמש"כ הקדמוני 'ישראל ר"ת "יש ששים רבוא אותיות לתורה" ... וכן כל הדורות יש בהם שורש הנשמות שקבלו אז התורה במעמד הר סיני. ומזה יוצא מוסר השכל שצריך כל אדם לשמור א"ע לבל יהיה בו שום צד נגיעה והשגת גבול בחבירו בעסק פרנסתו ולא יתקנא בו אם יראה אצלו מעלה יתירה ממנו. כי כמו בס"ת אם יש בה נגיעה היא פסולה כי צריך להיות מוקף גויל כן כאו"א מבנ"י צריך לשמור מכל צד נגיעה כי אם לא כן נפסל חלק שורש נשמתו באותיות התורה. תפארת שלמה שבועות דף קמא

Every sefer Torah has 600,000 letters which corresponds to the 600,000 souls of the Jewish people that stood on Har Sinai ... In each generation, the root of the souls that accepted the Torah at Har Sinai are still apparent. From this we learn an important lesson that each person must guard himself from inappropriately encroaching on one's friend regarding his business and he should not be jealous if he sees his friend with something he doesn't have. (The reason for this is) that just as regarding a sefer Torah, the Torah is invalid if two letters touch each other because of the mukaf g'vil concept, so too every Jew must guard himself from encroaching on anyone else, for if not, his portion in the Torah is invalid.

Tiferet Shlomo, Shavuot, pg. 141a

R. Tzadok HaKohen (1823-1900) also addresses this idea and explains how this idea is significant both on an individual level and for the Jewish people as a whole:

אבל זכות התורה אינו בא בתפלה על רבו ההשפעה רק שהיא ממילא מתרבת ע"י

התורה ששם הוא שורש קבלת השפע של כל הנפשות מישראל. דידוע דשרשם בתורה דס' רבוא אותיות נגד ס' רבוא נפשות כנודע. והגם דמ"מ אין כל אות דומה לחבירו וכל א' יש לו חלק ידוע בתורה מ"מ מצד חלקו אין לו גבול לומר שדבר זה נמנע כלל. כי כל חלק עצמו כשמגיע לעיקר שרשו ודביקותו בכל הר"י מתדמה לכל שאין לו גבול כלל וע"י התורה הוא התאחדות החלק בכל. רסיסי לילה אות מג

But the merit of Torah (study) does not come to (fruition the same way as) prayer does with an increase of influence. Rather, its merit increases automatically through Torah study for it is the root of potential abundance for all Jewish souls, for it is known that their root is in Torah because there are 600,000 letters representing the 600,000 souls. While each letter is different from the rest, and each person has his own portion in Torah, nevertheless, his portion does not limit him (to other areas of Torah) ... and learning Torah serves to unite all portions of Torah.

Resisei Leilah no. 43

R. Tzadok expresses two aspects of the idea that the letters of the Torah represent each Jew. First, each person has his own portion in Torah. Each person has his own insights in Torah that nobody else will discover. Whether it is a question that has not yet been asked, a new way of understanding an idea, or a different way of organizing information, each person has the ability to discover his own personal portion of Torah. Second, the Torah serves to unify the Jewish people. Each person represents one part of a whole. Each person's share in Torah is available to everyone else.

This *Torah To Go* issue marks the commemoration of three events that celebrate the Torah. Purim is a day categorized by Chazal as a day of reaccepting the Torah. The Chag

HaSemikhah celebrates the passing on of our *mesorah* to a new generation of Torah scholars. The dedication of a sefer Torah celebrates kavod HaTorah. As we celebrate these events, we should keep in mind the lessons we learn from the sefer Torah. We should constantly remember that we represent a walking sefer Torah, both as individuals and as members of the Jewish people.

Endnotes

1. This article was adapted from an article written for the B'Lev Echad program in memory of the eight students of Yeshivat Merkaz HaRav and Yashlztatz who were murdered by a terrorist on Rosh Chodesh Adar II 5768. It also appeared in the Benjamin and Rose Berger Shavuot To-Go® 5769. The author thanks J.Z. Spier for his initial research and coordination of the program.
2. Regarding the practice of tearing one's garments upon witnessing a death, see *Gesher HaChaim* 4:9.
3. Ramban seems to be consistent with his own opinion in *Milchamot HaShem, Sukkah* 4b, that the parchment of the sefer Torah only receives its holiness from the letters that are written on it. His comments in *Milchamot HaShem* imply that even if the name of G-d is not written on the parchment, but there are eighty-five letters of the Torah text on the parchment, the parchment is infused with holiness.
4. A *meit mitzvah* is a corpse that is discovered and there are no relatives to take responsibility for the burial.
5. R. Soloveitchik developed this idea in a lecture that was originally given on Shevat 3, 5719 in Yiddish. The Yiddish notes were compiled by Dr. Hillel Zeidman and were translated to Hebrew by R. Shalom Carmi. The article appears in *Beit Yosef Sha'ul* Vol. IV (1994).
6. In reality, there are only 304,805 letters in the Torah. There are also many more than 600,000 Jews. See R. Moshe Sofer, *Chatam Sofer*, page 72b of his *Commentary to Masechet Chullin*, who deals with this question.
7. *Menachot* 34a.

The Role of Vashti in the Purim Story

The Mishna, *Megillah* 2:3, records a dispute regarding how much of the Megillah must be read:

מהיכן קורא אדם את המגילה, ויוצא בה ידי חובתו--רבי מאיר אומר, כולה; רבי יהודה אומר, מ"איש יהודי" (אסתר ב,ה); רבי יוסי אומר, מ"אחר הדברים האלה" (אסתר ג,א).

From where must one begin reading the Megillah in order to fulfill one's obligation? R. Meir says one must read the entire Megillah. R. Yehuda says [one must begin no later than] "there was a certain Jewish man..." (2:5). R. Yosi says [one must begin no later than] "After these events" (3:1).

The unspoken question that the tannaim in this Mishna allude to has been frequently asked by modern readers — what was the point of including chapter one [or, according to R. Yosi, chapters one and two] in Megillat Esther? The basic plot of the Megillah details the threats to, and the salvation of, the Jewish people. The Megillah could have begun with the rise of Haman and any necessary background information could have been added there. R. Yehuda and R. Yosi see the opening of the Megillah — the ostentatious display of the wealth of the Persian monarch, the great banquet that goes on, month after month, the story of the deposing of Vashti the Queen after the public humiliation that she caused the king, the selection of a new queen — as non-essential, at least *be-di-avad* (post-factum).



Deena Rabinovich, EdD

Director, Jewish Education Program, Stern College
for Women

The halakhah at the end of the day requires us to read the entire Megillah.¹ If we focus on the plot alone, we realize that it is not really possible to conceive of the Megillah without the initial narratives, just as it is not possible (Rashi's famous question at the start of his Bible commentary notwithstanding) to conceive of starting the Torah in the middle of Parashat Bo and leave out the entire Sefer Bereishit.² Megillat Esther is a creative tour de force, richly detailed and chock full of literary tricks that scholars, particularly in recent decades, have been uncovering and noting with no apparent end in sight.³ Our focus here is the episode involving Queen Vashti who, in 1:9-12, is summoned to appear before the king and his guests at the royal banquet and refuses to do so. Only these details are provided. The remainder of chapter one describes the reaction of the king and his advisers to the shocking refusal by the queen, but Vashti's role in the story essentially begins and ends with those four verses. What do they teach or allude to? What light do these verses shine on the dénouement of Esther's story?

The Midrashic View of Vashti

The text tells us virtually nothing about Vashti other than that she was beautiful and that, clearly, she had more than a little backbone. The meaning or derivation of her name is uncertain.⁴ As with other minor characters in the Megillah, Vashti is not introduced with any biographical or genealogical data. Here the midrashim step in. Vashti was, we are told, the daughter of Belshazzar⁵ and the granddaughter of Nevuchadnetzar, the king of Babylon who destroyed the First Temple.⁶ Nevuchadnetzar is, from the perspective of Chazal, among the most wicked of men.⁷ In tying Vashti to such a man, Chazal hinted at their assessment of her. They did not give her much credit for defending human dignity. As Michael Fox observed, the rabbis "thoroughly approve of feminine reserve ... but they could not believe that a gentile — the granddaughter of King Nebuchanezzar — would have shown true modesty."⁸

Unlike Vashti, Achashverosh, in the midrashic view, was a commoner who began his career in the royal stables. When his father, Darius, wrested

control of Babylonia from Belshazzar, Vashti was selected as Achashverosh's wife.⁹ Thus Vashti provided a veneer of legitimacy for the new royal family. The difficulties (not to speak of internal inconsistencies) in the midrashic reading of the historical record are not our issue here. It is true that Darius, the father of Xerxes, was not a descendant of Cyrus the Great, and that might be the nugget of history behind this particular midrashic tradition.

The Megillah tells us that while Achashverosh was hosting his second party for the male citizens of Shushan, Vashti was hosting a party for the women [Esther 1:9]. Here, too, details are supplied by the aggadah. Vashti took the women on a tour of the private chambers of the King to satisfy their prurient curiosity. The tour may also

have given the women an opportunity to engage in illicit relations.¹⁰

As for Achashverosh's drink-infused demand that Vashti appear at his party so that he could show her off, the midrash once again fills in the blanks. Vashti was required to appear in the nude — that was the manner in which the king wished to display her beauty following some banter with some of his guests. And, the Gemara tells us, Vashti would have ordinarily agreed to her husband's demand were it not for the fact that she had developed leprosy (or sprouted a tail).¹¹ By this interpretation, Vashti's refusal was not based on the impropriety of her husband's demand but on the contingency of her condition.¹² The midrashim, then, provide a backstory identifying Vashti as a hater of Jews who was punished appropriately and

replaced by Esther, who goes on to save her people. Vashti, under this view, is the anti-Esther.

Contemporary Scholarship

Contemporary critics, though, reading the Megillah without the midrashic additions, have suggested alternative understandings of the Megillah as a whole and of its various characters, including Vashti. While their textual inferences are noteworthy and appreciated, their conclusions seem to fall short of the mark in explaining the role of Vashti in the Megillah. Adele Berlin, for instance, argues that Megillat Esther must be read as a farce and that we “cannot appreciate the story fully unless we realize it is meant to be funny. The subject of the farce is the Persian empire and



Persian court where a ‘major policy decision,’ the annihilation of the Jews is made casually, but a small domestic incident, Vashti’s non-appearance at a party, becomes a crisis of state, with all the bureaucratic trappings that can be mustered.”¹³

While it is certainly plausible to read the character of Achashverosh as a fool and that of Mordecai as a wise man, labeling all of the characters as “types” ignores the growth of Esther. When we first meet Esther she is a passive young woman, an orphan under the protection of her cousin. She is dragged off to the palace and she continues to listen to the various people who give her advice. In the course of the story, she becomes a brave, confident courier who is thrust onto the largest of stages and performs as an expert. Berlin’s reading also

reduces Haman to “an archetypal comic villain ... not darkly evil” of whom we “are not meant to be threatened” since “he is doomed from the start.”¹⁴

Berlin’s reading also does not take into account the history the Jews have had with the Amalekite forbears of Haman, nor with the centuries of anti-Semitism that have followed. Berlin feels that the nature of the festival, the holiday of Purim, is the main force behind the book and is content with classifying the book as one of comedy with the message that “all is right with the world.” But is that all that a book of Tanakh should be? To affirm that all is right with the Jews? To sum up Megillat Esther as a feel-good farce ignores the more serious themes and dark elements that exist alongside the admittedly comical and farcical

elements. These themes include the survival of the Jewish people in exile, struggle with foreign cultures and mores, the end of the age of miracles and facing down anti-Semitism. Farce does not quite do justice to the Megillah.

Timothy Beal, another contemporary, acknowledges the farcical nature of Megillat Esther, but also sees it as a “strange ... sometimes deadly serious book of questions” that arise in the context of exile.¹⁵ The main question of the book, in his view, is one of identity. Beal argues that “the book of Esther reflects a context in which the traditional means of self-construal have lost their meaning.”¹⁶

According to Beal, Purim teaches us “to recognize, and even to celebrate, the otherness within us that we so

**ACHIEVE
ANYTHING**

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often try to repress or hide” and as such, the holiday of Purim is not the force, or “reiteration of Esther,” but is a “it is a survival of Esther.”¹⁷ Beal sees Vashti as an object to the male subject, a “special object, a quintessential something to bounce off in order to remind him of how solid he is.” She is “the grounding for his own identity” whose refusal to come “reveals the male subject’s special and highly problematic dependence on her as fixed object.”¹⁸ Vashti refused “to come into the king’s presence to be the object of the pleased male ogle” and as a result she “will never again be *present*, and someone more *pleasing* [presentable, objectifiable] will fill the space left by her.”¹⁹ Vashti, in short, was written out of the palace, and written out of the Megillah. Her absence, Beal contends, leaves the reader “in the company of Persian fools, at the center of whom is a dangerous power vacuum called the king” and that we “mourn the blank space left by Vashti.”²⁰ “The role of Vashti is thus one of a palimpsest, a story that is written, then erased, and then a new story is written over the old, erased one ... Vashti will survive her own end in the narrative. She will haunt the rest of the story. The story of Esther and Mordecai never shakes her memory.”²¹

For Michael V. Fox, it is not merely the character of Vashti that proves haunting — it is the entire story that revisits every year as he hears the Megillah read in shul:

*Indeed, I relive its truth and know its actuality. Almost without an effort of imagination, I feel something of the anxiety that seized the Jews of Persia upon learning of Haman’s threat to their lives, and I join in their exhilaration at their deliverance. Except that I do not think of ‘their’ but ‘my’ ...*²²

He notes the anti-Semitic horrors of the twentieth century — the pogroms in Russia, the murders in the Ukraine, the “Persecutor of the Jews — now not vizier but supreme leader” who almost realized “Haman’s goal to ‘slaughter, slay, and destroy all the Jews, young and old.’”²³ The literary forces of the narrative help him believe that there will be relief and deliverance for the Jews, even when God appears to be hidden.

Like Berlin and Beal, Fox comments on the tone of humor and farcical elements present in the opening scene. Rather than dictate the tone of the entire book, the comical opening, in Fox’s reading, causes “the audience to lower its guard” and thus compounds the shock as “we see pride, egoism, royal instability mutate into murderous hatred and sinister scheme.”²⁴ The role of Vashti becomes important since “even a scanty presentation of a character can be suggestive of a larger quality and the author’s attitude toward it ... a literary figure does not exist in isolation ... the actions and experiences of one figure, even when these do not affect the outcome of the main action, alter the reader’s understanding of other parallel characters.”²⁵ Fox suggests that we try to understand Vashti by pairing her with characters “with whom she is contraposed in conflict” like the men of the court and those with whom she is in “correspondence,” like Esther.²⁶

Vashti’s Influence on Mordecai and Esther

Indeed, Vashti’s role in the Purim story can be understood by pairing her with other characters. However, unlike Fox’s conclusion, a closer look at the text dealing with Vashti

and her fateful choice helps us understand how her example may have influenced Mordecai and Esther. The more surprising comparison is with Mordecai. Vashti embarrassed the king in the presence of his boon companions: Mordecai publicly snubs Haman by refusing to bow to him in the presence of a group of gossiping courtiers. Both offenses result in international edicts that are enacted by the king and publicized by runners dispatched throughout the empire. Vashti insults her husband, and suddenly all women are suspected of despising their husbands and commanded to show their spouses honor.

לֹא עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ, עֲוֹתָהּ וְשָׂתִי הַמֶּלֶכָּה ...
כִּי-יֵצֵא דְבַר-הַמֶּלֶכָּה עַל-כָּל-הַנָּשִׁים, לְהַבְזֹז
בְּעֵלֵיהֶן בְּעֵינֵיהֶן: בְּאֶמְרָם, הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ
אָמַר לְהַבִּיא אֶת-וְשָׂתִי הַמֶּלֶכָּה לְפָנָיו--וְלֹא-
בָּאָה. וַיִּשְׁלַח סָפָרִים, אֶל-כָּל-מְדִינֹת
הַמֶּלֶךְ--אֶל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּכַתְּבָהּ, וְאֶל-עַם
וְעַם כָּל־שׁוֹנוֹ: לְהִזִּית כָּל-אִישׁ שָׂרָר בְּבֵיתוֹ,
וּמִדְּבַר כָּל־שׁוֹן עִמּוֹ.

Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only ... For this deed of the queen will come abroad unto all women, to make their husbands contemptible in their eyes, when it will be said: The king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not... for he sent letters into all the king’s provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and speak according to the language of his people.

Esther 1:16-17, 22

The root b-z-h appears both in the description of Vashti’s alleged offense against her husband, and in Haman’s reaction to Mordecai’s snub (Esther 3:6). Mordecai insults Haman and

suddenly all Jews are suspect of treason against the king.

ישנו עם אחד מפוזר ומפוזר בין העמים, בכל מדינות מלכותך; ודתיהם שנות מכל-עם, ואת-דתי המלך אינם עשים, ולמלך אין—שנה, להניחם. אם-על המלך טוב, יפתח לאבדם.

There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from those of every people; neither keep they the king's laws; therefore it profiteth not the king to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed.

Esther 3:8-9

The money belonging to the Jews will be taken from them and used to enrich Haman's coffers.²⁷ The plot similarities between Vashti and Mordecai underscore their common goal to uphold human dignity and freedom of

conscience in the face of tyranny and oppression. Vashti knew that no good could result from her appearance at a drunken, all-male party. Her options were not promising. She could acquiesce to the command of the king, lose her dignity and help him lose his as well (which would no doubt anger him at a later time). Or she could refuse on principle, angering the king and exposing herself to a harsh consequence, but maintaining both her dignity and that of the king. Faced with a lose-lose situation, knowing that one way or another she was doomed to fall, she opts to fall with dignity and refuses to appear.

While it would seem that Mordecai had no prior compunctions about bowing to Achashverosh, the elevation of Haman as the key political adviser to the king made prior behavior

[bowing] a non-option.²⁸ As Yoram Hazony notes:

As long as Achashverosh took decisions through broad consultation with a range of advisers, there was every reason to hope that the laws ... of the Persian state would tend towards at least the roughest approximation of a just settlement among the competing perspectives ... in the empire. Haman's installation ... suppressed the search for a greater truth on the part of the state; henceforth it would become that defined by the perspective and desires of a single man, Haman. Since it would be his desires rather than truth which would now determine right and wrong for much of mankind, his elevation transformed him (and Achashverosh as well) into a usurping god ... an idol. To serve his whim would be as service to the Canaanite gods, for whom men had



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murdered their children...

According to Hazony, the elevation of Haman as sole advisor to the king dramatically changed the political landscape in Shushan, adding idolatrous overtones where none had previously existed. Before, the king had many advisors and he would listen to their advice before acting. Now, Haman was in complete control, the sole adviser, the only voice. Multiple opinions were no longer desired or allowed — Haman's was the only opinion that carried any authority. Mordecai views this behavior as a form of idolatry and refuses to acquiesce. When Mordecai remains seated, refusing to rise and bow to Haman, he, too, is aware that there are bound to be consequences, although it may not have occurred to him that he was endangering the entire Jewish people. Mordecai is aware that he has entered a lose-lose situation where the only choice is to fall. Like Vashti, he decides that "when the fall is all there is, it matters."²⁹ Vashti's brief appearance on the screen, her refusal to relinquish her belief in what was right, enables us to understand the scope and rationale of Mordecai's refusal and his commitment to his beliefs.

If Vashti and Mordecai, at least in this sense, complement one another, Vashti and Esther are contraposed. Where Vashti refuses to appear when ordered, Esther dares to appear where not invited. Where Vashti was silent, Esther succeeds with her skillful speech.³⁰ Where Vashti obstinately refuses to engage, Esther approaches the king with trepidation and meekness. Where Vashti is blunt *va-ti-maen* — she refuses (Esther 1:12), Esther is subtle, יבוא ... המלך טוב ... אם על המלך טוב (If it pleases the king ... the

king and Haman should come, Esther 5:7), careful with both her choice of words and her timing. She approaches the king, waiting for Achashverosh to acknowledge her presence, and then graciously invites both Achashverosh and Haman to first one party and then another. It is only at the second party that she begins to describe the threat she and her people are facing. Esther and Vashti differ, then, in tone and tactics.

Even the struggles the two women face are fundamentally different. Where Vashti's struggle was personal with national implications (because of her refusal, an edict is passed impacting all women), Esther's struggle was national with personal implications (she will only be in danger once she reveals her connection to the Jews who are about to be destroyed). It is Vashti's original vulnerability that sets the scene for Esther's. Vashti's weakness was related to her gender (a woman in a man's world) while Esther's vulnerability is threefold [she is a woman, an orphan and a Jew]. But, at this time, it is Vashti's failure that teaches Esther how to work within the system. Esther learns what steps she must take, what words she must use. Where Vashti fails, Esther will succeed.

The Megillah of Opposites

Rav Yoel Bin Nun refers to Megillat Esther as *Megillat HaHephech*, the megillah of opposites. Why do we need such a megillah in Tanakh? The Megillah comes to remind us who is in control in a topsy-turvy world:

מסרת הכללתה של מגילת אסתר בתנ"ך היא אפוא להעלות על הפרק את השאלה-מי שולט בעולם ההפך?
אילו היה בידנו התנ"ך ללא מגילת אסתר,

היינו מכירים את הקב"ה רק בכל מקום ומצב שניתן לקרוא בשמו. המגילה באה להשלים חיסרון שאי אפשר בלעדיו- ללמד אותנו שהקב"ה נמצא במסתרים גם באותם מקומות שאי אפשר לנקוב בהם בשמו. גם באותן סיטואציות שבהן אי אפשר להזכיר כלל תפילה, הלכה, או כל דבר שבקדושה. המגילה מראה את דרכי ההשגחה בממלכת ההפך, השגחה הפועלת בתוך דרכי האינטריגות, המקרה וההפך. מגילת אסתר משלימה, אם כן, את התנ"ך. היא נכתבה במכוון בצורה חילונית ומקצנת כל כך כדי ללמדנו שהשגחת ה' נמצאת גם במקומות ובמצבים הרחוקים מקדושה, וכי יד ה' היא המנהלת את העולם גם במקומות של הסתר פנים.

*The purpose of including Megillat Esther in Tanakh is to raise the question: Who is in control in a topsy-turvy world? If the Tanakh had not included Megillat Esther, we would recognize God only in places and situations where we could call Him by name. Megillat Esther comes to fill this gap. It teaches us that God is found in hidden places, in places where it is not possible to name Him by name. Even in those situations where it is not possible to mention a prayer, a halacha, or anything indicating kedusha. Megillat Esther shows us the path of hashgacha even in a kingdom of opposites, hashgacha that works through intrigue, coincidence and lotteries. Megillat Esther completes Tanakh. It was purposely written in a secular and exaggerated manner to teach us that God's hashgacha is to be found in places and situations that are far removed from kedusha and that the Hand of God directs the world even in places where His Face is hidden.*³¹

In a topsy-turvy world, where the ruler is impulsive and governs by narcissism, where the Jews are mired in exile and God seems far away, He is still, in fact, present. Why do Vashti and Mordecai have different outcomes despite the same approach

to their lose-lose situation? Because God orchestrated a different outcome. Vashti needed to be replaced, but not before teaching us what ordinarily happened in Shushan when one stood on principle. Her story gives us a greater appreciation of the salvation of the Jewish people as a whole and specifically of Mordecai. It also provides insight into Esther's reasoning for trying a more diplomatic approach. Yet even while Esther learned from Vashti's story to confront the king in a more soft-spoken manner, we can't lose sight of the fact that she risked her life in confronting the king and it was only through God's providence that she was successful.

Vashti appears only briefly in the Megillah but, like a palimpsest, she leaves behind traces. On one level, she is "an object lesson for other women throughout the king's dominion, to keep their places in the household economy."³² But more to our point, she emerges as a major influence on Mordecai and Esther, and as the key for our understanding of the challenges they faced and overcame.

Endnotes

- 1 Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 690:3.
- 2 Jon D. Levinson [Esther: A Commentary, London/Louisville, 1997], 1, is surely correct that Esther is a complex piece of literature "with few and perhaps no scenes that could be omitted without damage."
- 3 Among the works which I examined while thinking about Vashti were Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1991; Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary Esther*, Philadelphia, JPS Society, 2001; Charles D. Harvey, *Finding Morality in the Diaspora: Moral Ambiguity and Transformed Morality in the Books of Esther*, Berlin/New York, Walter DeGruyter, 2003; Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther*, London/New York:

Routledge, 1997; Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014; Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther*, Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 2000; S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 [1963], pp. 419-455; Jeffrey Cohen, "Vashti, The Unsung Heroine," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 24:2, 1996, 103-106; and Yonatan Grossman, *Esther: Scroll of Secrets*, Israel: Maggid Publishers, 2013 [Hebrew]. But the list of articles and books about the Megillah goes on and on.

4 The name is often said to mean "beauty" or its equivalent, but that is apparently an anachronism. J. Dynely Prince, "Note on Vashti," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Boston, 1914 33:2, p. 87-90.

5 *Esther Rabbah* 3:5.

6 TB Megillah 10b. These identifications are tied in with the chronology sketched out by the rabbis, many of whom saw the events of the Megillah as taking place between the destruction of the First Temple and the construction of the Second. Belshazzar [or Bel-shar-usur], historically, was the son of Nabonides, the last king of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. [Amelie Kuhrt, *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources of the Achaemenid Period*, London: 2009].

7 See *Sanhedrin* 92b and various other references.

8 Fox, p. 164

9 TB Megillah 12b; *Esther Rabbah* 3:14; *Yalkut Shimoni Esther* 1049.

10 TB Megillah 12a.

11 TB Megillah 12b.

12 See Fox, p. 165.

13 Berlin p. xix.

14 Berlin, p. xx.

15 Beal, p. 49.

16 Beal, p. 111.

17 Beal, p. 124.

18 Beal, p. 21.

19 Beal, p. 23.

20 Beal, p. 26.

21 Beal, p. 29

22 Beal, p. 11.

23 Beal, p. 12.

24 Fox, p. 25.

25 Fox, p. 167.

26 Fox, p. 167.

27 Berlin notes that "according to Haman, the Jews were not currently providing any income to the king" and understands that the king is not only giving Haman "authority over the Jews" but also "permission to keep any tribute he collected from them." [Commentary on Esther 3:11, p. 42]

28 There are many midrashim that help to explain why Mordecai refused to bow. One is *Esther Rabbah* 6:2, which suggests that Haman wore an idol around his neck so bowing to Haman would be, in fact, idolatry. *Esther Rabbah* 5:9 suggests a prior altercation between Mordecai and Haman and places both Haman and Mordecai in Jerusalem at the beginning of the construction of the Second Temple. When the enemies of the Jews disputed the right of the Jews to begin construction, both sides agreed to send messengers to the king to resolve the issue. Haman was chosen to represent the enemies; Mordecai was chosen to represent the Jews. On the journey, Haman ran out of food and begged bread from Mordecai. Mordecai agreed to share his rations with Haman, on the condition that Haman become an indentured servant of Mordecai's. Haman agreed and the document of indenture was written on the bottom of Mordecai's shoe. Many years later, in Shushan, when Haman would walk past Mordecai and expect that Mordecai would stand up and bow down, Mordecai would extend his foot, displaying the sole on which the document was written. This filled Haman with rage. If the first midrash gives Mordecai a warning that there would come a time when he would need to take a stand, the second midrash helps to explain the personal nature of Haman's revenge.

29 John Goldman, *A Lion in Winter: A Comedy in Two Acts*. New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1966.

30 S. Talmon, (1963). "Wisdom" in the *Book of Esther*. *Vetus Testamentum*, 13(1937), 419-455.

31 Rav Yoel Bin Nun, "Megillat HaHephech" in *Hadassah hi Esther*, p. 52, 54 [Hebrew]

32 Beal, p. 25.

Esther and Bas Paraoh: Reaching for What is Out of Reach

At perhaps the most tension-filled moment in the Megilla, Chazal make a curious and enigmatic comment.

Esther is about to enter, brazen and unsolicited — “*asher lo chadas* (not according to the law)” — into her husband’s throne room to appeal to the king about the impending plight of her people. After three days of fasting, Esther dons her royal garments and slowly begins her approach, and Achashverosh’s reaction was all she could have hoped for:

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה, עֹמֶדֶת
בְּחֶצֶר—נִשְׁאַה חוֹ, בְּעֵינָיו; וַיֻּשָּׁט הַמֶּלֶךְ
לְאַסְתֵּר, אֶת-שִׁרְבִיט הַזָּהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדוֹ, וַתִּקְרַב
אֶסְתֵּר, וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשִּׁרְבִיט.

And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favor in his eyes; and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. And Esther drew near, and touched the top of the scepter.

Esther 5:2

Here, Chazal say what, to many, has become a well-known part of the story. As Achashverosh holds out his scepter, it miraculously stretches (Megillah 15b; Yalkut Shimoni, Esther 1056) — ostensibly to cover the distance between its master and Esther. As wondrous as it is, one question begs to be asked: *Why* do Chazal say this? The verse itself seems to give no indication at all of any supernatural occurrence. And, when considering the overall narrative of the



Rabbi David Block

Mashgiach Ruchani, Shalhevet High School

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story, this miracle seems remarkably insignificant. Does the stretching of the scepter really add all that much to the story? The *true* miracle is that Achashverosh allowed Esther’s intrusion; the true marvel is that Achashverosh did not sentence her to death, but responded graciously: “What troubles you, Queen Esther, and what is your request? [Ask] up to half the kingdom, and it will be granted” (5:3)! Does it matter whether the length of Achashverosh’s scepter was two cubits or twelve? What do Chazal intend with this puzzling comment?

The key to understanding this midrash may be not to view it in isolation but to pull the zoom lens back and consider its theme more globally. Indeed, this is not the first time Chazal tell us of a moment in which one extends one’s hand and it — or, in our case, that which the hand is holding — miraculously stretches. About a millennium before the Purim story,¹ when Bas Paraoh sees a basket floating in the Nile, “*vatislach es-amasa vatikachehah*” — Bas Paraoh sends her *amasa* to fetch it. The simple translation of *amasa* is “her maidservant,” but,

noting the relationship between *amasa* and *amah/amos* (cubit/cubits), Chazal famously offer an alternative explanation: Bas Paraoh extended her hand and it miraculously stretched the length of many cubits (*Shemos Rabbah* 1:23, *Sotah* 12b).²

While the circumstances of the two stories are certainly different, the thematic connection between the rabbinic interpretations are unmistakable. In fact, Chazal themselves already make this very connection:

וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה אֹמֶר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן: שְׁלֹשָׁה מַלְאָכֵי הַשֵּׁרֶת נִזְדַּמְּנוּ לָהּ בְּאוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה... וְאַחַד שִׁמְתָח אֶת הַשִּׁרְבִיט... וְכֵן אֵתָּה מוֹצֵא בְּאַמְתָּהּ שֶׁל בֵּית פֶּרֶעָה.

“And it was so when the king saw Queen Esther.” R. Yochanan said: Three ministering angels were appointed to help her at that moment... And one [of the angels was appointed] to stretch the golden scepter... So too you find with the arm of the daughter of Paraoh.
Megillah 15b

The connection between the two statements of Chazal — indeed, self-proclaimed — is inescapable. But what are we to make of it? Are the two linked only through haphazard

similarities? Or is there something far more intentional in this perplexing connection? I want to propose that, by suggesting that link, Chazal are teaching that to understand their words in Esther, we must first appreciate their words in Shemos.

Yes, in Shemos, Chazal were capitalizing on a textual homonym (*amah*), but my *rebbe*, Rabbi David Fohrman, suggests that their translation of the verse is more than just a cute play on words. Consider the scene as Bas Paraoh notices a mysterious basket floating in the Nile and sends her maidservant to fetch it. Who *was* Bas Paraoh? She is, quite literally, the daughter of the king — the very king who just decreed genocide against Israelite male babies. Her father is the reason that this basket needed to be placed in the Nile to begin with. And it is his own daughter, the princess of Egypt, who saves the Israelite child from her father's decree. When she opens the basket, she knows immediately that the child is "*miyaldei ha'ivrim*," an Israelite. And, "*vatachmol alav*," she has compassion on him. She chooses to raise the child in the home of he who decreed the child's death. And, as later verses make clear, Moshe *knows* that he is an Israelite; his adopted mother brings him up that way.

Next to Paraoh himself, Bas Paraoh might be the least likely person to do this. Raising an Israelite in her father's palace seems utterly out of reach. And yet, Bas Paraoh reaches for it. And when she does, Chazal tell us that her arm, figuratively, stretches. God ensures that when one acts heroically for something moral, when one stretches oneself and reaches for a good that seems out of reach, the desired outcome becomes well within

one's capacity to grasp.

And now let us return to *our* midrash regarding Esther. Whether Achashverosh's scepter actually stretches is hardly the point. Chazal are urging us not to overlook the significance of that moment, because it is quite easy to; when Achashverosh extends his scepter, nothing changes for the Jewish people. They are not spared, and they hardly seem closer to salvation. But, in fact, that moment was the catalyst of all that was about to come.

Just moments before, Esther is faced with a terrifying choice: She can let her people succumb to the malicious plans of Haman, or else barge into the throne room unsolicited and risk death. Esther is ambivalent at first; when Mordechai suggests that she choose the latter path, she seems unwilling to risk her life. And quite understandably so: even if she were to be personally pardoned, it remains extremely unlikely that she would persuade the king to save an entire nation by reversing decrees issued by his most trusted advisor. That seems entirely out of reach.

Yet, ultimately, she obliges. Like the king's *daughter* back in Egypt, Esther, the king's *wife*, opts to reach for that which is, figuratively, beyond her grasp. And when she does, God ensures that Achashverosh's scepter stretches; that the impossible becomes within reach. Just like Bas Paraoh's courage sets in motion the events that would lead to the salvation of the Israelite people, it is Esther's courage, in this very moment, that does precisely the same thing for the Jewish people many years later.³

It is well known that Purim is the only holiday that does not commemorate a *nes nigleh*, an open miracle. If one

would want to see the trajectory of the Megilah's events as coincidental or political maneuvering, one *could*. Indeed, that is precisely what makes the celebration of Purim so poignant: we celebrate God's protection and intimacy even when it is not overtly recognizable. But to notice the remarkable confluences of "coincidences" as Providence, to appreciate the intricacies of God's intervention at every moment, is not easy. So, in their subtle yet powerful way, Chazal try to assist us. They leave clues, disguised as dramatic details of the story, that help us recognize God's subtle yet timeless wink. We simply have to open our eyes.

Endnotes

1 Or, according to some, closer to 800 years.

2 Significantly, in the *Midrash Tanchuma's* (*Tanchuma*, Warsaw, Shemos 7) version of this midrash, the text uses the word "*venismascha* (and it stretched)" — precisely the same word used to describe Achashverosh's scepter in the the Gemara — "*shemasach* (that it stretched)."

3 It should not be ignored that the similarities between the two midrashim are not perfectly parallel. In Shemos, Bas Paraoh reaches and it is her own arm that stretches; in the Megilah, Esther does the figurative reaching, but it is *Achashverosh's* scepter that stretches. While the purpose of the imperfect parallel is not entirely clear, I suggest that it might have to do with the circumstances of each situation. In the Shemos story, it is Bas Paraoh who is in control of the outcome — the decision as to whether to bring Moshe in and raise him in the palace is her own. In Shushan, it was in Esther's control to try to reach; whether she would be successful was in the hands of Achashverosh. So, when Esther reached, it was Achashverosh's scepter that stretched. In either case, the significance is the same: when one reaches for what seems out of reach, with the help of God, the impossible becomes attainable.

Our Hamantaschen's Forgotten Meaning

Of the many oddities codified as part of our annual Purim celebrations, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, in his glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 695:2), records a little-known custom of eating *ma'achal zeronim* (foods with seeds) on Purim in commemoration of the food Daniel and his fellows eat while in captivity in Nevuchadnezar's court (Daniel 1:8). Yet surprisingly, this medieval *minhag* to eat seeds on Purim (*Kolbo* # 45) is one many of us fulfill each year — albeit unknowingly — when we consume copious quantities of hamantaschen of the poppy seed variety. In fact, Rabbi Yisrael Isser of Ponevezh, in his *Menucha u-Kedusha*, explicitly connects the eating of these tasty triangular treats to the diet of Daniel and his friends. For him, poppy seed is not just another flavor, it is the *mahn* (Yiddish for poppy seed) in the hamantaschen. Scholar Hayyim Schauss echoes this idea by declaring that hamantaschen is merely a conglomeration of Haman, *mahn* (poppy seed) and *tashen* (pocket).² While we may be thankful for the trivia and this anomalous custom



Rabbi Tuvia Brander

Rabbi, Young Israel of West Hartford

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for bringing us our delightful three-cornered confectionaries, we are left pondering how Daniel's menu connects with the Purim saga. Why did we bake his story into our Purim observance each year?

Certainly, at first glance, the Books of Esther and Daniel seem intimately linked — they have similar characters and plots, use many of the same narrative devices, motifs and even specific textual parallels. Esther and Daniel, the title characters of both stories, are each called by a Hebrew and a foreign name (Esther 2:7; Daniel 1:6-7), are described as physically attractive (Esther 2:7; Daniel 1:4), and are blessed with the favor and trust of palace officials (Esther 2:9; Daniel 1:9-10). Daniel is stationed at the king's gate (Daniel 2:49) just as Mordechai sits at the

gate of the king (Esther 2:21). The two books share similar powerful moments of religious conflict and heroism — defiant refusals to bow down — and dire consequences for their faith-based insubordination (Esther 3:2-4; Daniel 3:12-18). Esther and Daniel are thrust into circumstances where they must intercede with the monarch in the hopes of averting the imminent destruction of their community (Esther 4-5; Daniel 2). Distinct parallels emerge even in depictions of governance in both books, as strange and capricious limitations preventing the amending of royal decrees feature prominently in both plots (Esther 8:8; Daniel 6:17). Fundamentally, the Books of Daniel and Esther tell tales of Jews coerced into the service of foreign power, who ultimately prove their worth, rising to greatness as courtiers and bringing honor and salvation to the Jewish people. The Books of Daniel and Esther focus on the same core question: How must Jews in the Diaspora conduct themselves in the palace of a foreign king — the seat of power of a foreign empire — the capital of an alien culture?

In many ways, eating poppy seed hamantaschen on Purim to remember Daniel and his friends — Megillat Esther's sister story — seems to make a lot of sense. However, a closer look at the stories show that while Daniel and Esther ask the same questions, the answers provided are remarkably different.

So in many ways, eating poppy seed hamantaschen on Purim to remember Daniel and his friends — Megillat Esther's sister story — seems to make a lot of sense. However, a closer look at the stories show that while Daniel and Esther ask the same questions, the answers provided are remarkably different.

Indeed, the similarities embedded in text, character and plot between the works seem to be drawing them into conversation with each other, but the conversation is hardly a harmonious one. Placed side by side, stark differences emerge between approach and outlook advocated in Esther on the one hand and advanced in Daniel on the other. Daniel is seen repeatedly casting off and subverting any trace or association with his foreign hosts' culture; Esther, on the other hand, is portrayed as being able to embrace her Persian milieu and marshaling it to help achieve her goals.

I. Names

Over the course of both books, Esther and Daniel are ascribed both Hebrew names and names in their vernaculars. Esther, thought to be derived from the Persian word for "star," is also called by a Hebrew name, Hadassah (Esther 2:7), whereas Daniel is given the Babylonian name Belteshazzar upon entering the Babylonian royal academy (Daniel 1:6-7). Yet immediately in the next verse (Daniel 1:8), we witness Daniel's total disregard for this new name, and throughout the entire Book of Daniel, not once is Daniel only referred to by this foreign name. By contrast, clearly the Book of Esther embraces her Persian name. After all, it is the Book of Esther not the Book of Hadassah, and once we are told her Hebrew name, Esther is never called Hadassah again. Even at the end of the Megillah as Esther is placed within her Jewish lineage, the verse identifies her as "Queen Esther daughter of Abihail" (9:29).

II. Royal Training and Food

Similarly, both Esther and Daniel are taken as part of formal royal programs with a set standard universally applied (i.e. a year's regiment of beautification before meeting the king [Esther 2:9-12] and a course of food and study to prepare to be reviewed by the king [Daniel 1]), and both emerge recognized as the best. Yet how do our protagonists accomplish this? Esther seems



מדור לדור

by Rabbi Aaron Brander (RIETS Class of 1958)

When we arrived in America in 1950, after time in the DP camps in Europe, my father and mother made the heroic decision to send me to a yeshiva instead of the norm at the time of sending to public school. That heroic decision eventually led me to Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan and is the reason why I merit celebrating the simcha of the semikhah of my grandson in the very auditorium where I celebrated my semikhah 58 years ago and the semikhah of my two sons, Rabbi Kenny ('86R) and Rabbi Asher ('92R) Brander.

Knowing that there are nine musmakhim whose grandfathers are also RIETS musmakhim speaks volumes about the legacy and vitality of our Yeshiva. As I reflect on my family's deep connection to RIETS for over 60 years, I am reminded of the verse (Kohelet 4:12) והחוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק, the three stranded rope is not easily severed.

MIDOR L'DOR HONOREES

RIETS celebrates the semikha of eleven musmakhim whose grandfathers are also musmakhim of RIETS

Rabbi Tuvia Brander '15R • Rabbi Aaron Brander '59R
 Rabbi Shlomo Clark '14R • Rabbi Matthew Clark '56R
 Rabbi Yakov Danishefsky '16R • Rabbi Dr. Chaim Danishefsky z"l '46R
 Rabbi Noam Friedman '17R • Rabbi Abraham z"l Insel '45R
 Rabbi Noach Goldstein '17R • Rabbi Dr. Noah Goldstein z"l '53R
 Rabbi Jonathan Grossman '17R • Rabbi Zelo Schussheim z"l '48R
 Rabbi Ari Lamm '15R • Rabbi Norman Lamm '51R
 Rabbi Elchanan Poupko '16R • Rabbi Baruch Poupko z"l '42R
 Rabbi Itamar Rosensweig '14R • Rabbi Bernard Rosensweig '50R
 Rabbi Ashie Schreier '17R • Rabbi Max Schreier '52R
 Rabbi Yaakov Taubes '17R • Rabbi Chaim Schulman z"l '52R

to embrace the process; she follows Persian cultural and beauty norms and undergoes the strict treatment regimen in preparation for meeting the king:

(ט) וַתִּיטֵב הַנַּעֲרָה בְּעֵינֶיהָ וַתִּשָּׂא חֹסֶד לְפָנָיו וַיְבַהֵל אֶת תַּמְרוּקֶיהָ וְאֶת מְנוֹתָהּ לְתֵת לָהּ וְאֶת שִׁבְעַת הַנַּעֲרוֹת הָרְאוּיֹת לְתֵת לָהּ מִבֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׁנֶה וְאֶת נַעֲרוֹתֶיהָ לְטוֹב בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים. (יב) וּבַהֲגִיעַ תֹּר נַעֲרָה וְנַעֲרָה לְבֹא אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוֹשׁ מִקֵּץ יְמֵי לָהּ כִּדָּת הַנָּשִׁים שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ כִּי כֹן יִמְלְאוּ יְמֵי מְרוּקֶיהָ שָׁשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים בְּשִׁמֹן הַמֹּר וְשָׁשָׁה חֳדָשִׁים בְּבָשְׂמִים וּבִתְמָרוּקֵי הַנָּשִׁים:

(9) *The girl [Esther] pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem. (12) When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics).*

Esther 2:9,12

By contrast, Daniel refuses to participate at all:

(ה) וַיִּמְנוּ לָהֶם הַמֶּלֶךְ דְּבַר יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ מִפֶּת בֵּג הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּמְנוּ מִשְׁתֵּיו וּלְגִדְלָם שְׁנַיִם שָׁלוֹשׁ וּמִקְצָתָם יַעֲמְדוּ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: (ח) וַיֵּשֶׁם דָּנִיֵּאל עַל לְבוֹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִתְגַּאֵל בְּפִתְבֵּג הַמֶּלֶךְ וּבָיִין מִשְׁתֵּיו וַיִּבְקֹשׁ מִשֵּׁר הַסְּרִיסִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִתְגַּאֵל: (יב) נִס נָא אֶת עַבְדֶּיךָ יָמִים עֲשָׂרָה וַיִּתְּנוּ לָנוּ מִן הַזֵּרָעִים וְנִאֲכָלָה וּנְשָׁתָה:

(5) *The king allotted daily rations to them from the king's food and from the wine he drank. They were to be educated for three years, at the end of which they were entered the king's service. (8) Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king's food or the wine he drank, so he sought permission of the chief officer not to defile himself. (12) "Please test*

your servant for ten days, giving us seeds to eat and water to drink."

Daniel 1:5,8,12

Dr. Aaron Koller points out that Daniel's resistance here transcends the mere halakhic restriction of *kashrut*; it bespeaks a meta-protest on Daniel's part against any attempt of acculturation. Daniel employs very strident language — "be defiled" (Daniel 1:8) — in his refusal to eat the king's food. As he insists on consuming only seeds, it is these seeds that represent the prototypical anti-cultural food, unchanged from its natural form by human processes or society. The protest is only heightened when Daniel's final success is ascribed not only to his refusal to participate but to God's direct intervention (Daniel 1:17).

III. Encountering the King

In both stories, there are moments when Daniel and Esther must intercede with the king in desperate attempts to prevent the impending death sentence hanging over them and their communities. Yet here too, Esther and Daniel approach this challenge in vastly differently ways. Esther, famously tasked with forestalling Haman's decrees, prepares to meet the king by "donning royalty" (Esther 5:1); Esther approaches Achashverosh adorned in her stately Persian regalia. By contrast, Daniel prays by imploring God to help and returns to the king, careful to ascribe his knowledge to God:

וַרְחֵמִיו לְמַבְעֵא מִן קֹדֶם אֶל-לֵה שְׁמִיָּא עַל רִזָּה דְּנָה דִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה דָּנִיֵּאל וְחִבְרוּהִי עִם שְׂאֵר חַכְמֵי בָבֶל: אֲדִינוּ לְדָנִיֵּאל בְּחֻזָּא דִּי לִילֵיא רִזָּה גְּלִי אֲדִינוּ דָּנִיֵּאל בְּרֹךְ לֵא-לֵה שְׁמִיָּא ... עֲנֵה דָּנִיֵּאל קֹדֶם מַלְכָּא וְאָמַר רִזָּה דִּי מַלְכָּא שְׂאֵל לֹא חַכְמֵיו אֲשַׁפִּין חֲרָטְמִין גְּזָרִין יִכְלִין לְהַחְיֶיהָ

לְמַלְכָּא: בְּרַם אֵינִי אֵלֶּה בְּשִׁמְיָא גְּלֵא רִזִּין וְהוֹדַע לְמַלְכָּא נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מָה דִּי לְהוּא בְּאַחֲרִית יוֹמֵיָא חֲלָמָךְ וְחֻזִּי רִאשֹׁן עַל מִשְׁכָּבְךָ דְּנָה הוּא. (18) *that they (Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) might implore the God of the Heaven for help regarding this mystery, so that Daniel and his colleagues would not be put to death together with the other wise men of Babylon. (19) The mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision; then Daniel blessed God of Heaven ... (27) Daniel answered the king and said, "The mystery about which the king has inquired — wise men, exorcists, magicians, and diviners cannot tell to the king. (28) But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what is to be at the end of days.*

Daniel 2:18-19,27-28

IV. Identity

The clearest contrast between Esther and Daniel — one closely connected with this central theme — is the way they construct and express their Jewish identity in public. Famously, Esther is instructed repeatedly not to reveal her "people nor her kindred" (2:10, 20), and it is only revealed in the direst of circumstances. Daniel, on the other hand, freely proclaimed his Jewish faith — openly attributing his every action and success to God. Even under extreme circumstances, Daniel refuses to hide his faith and even chooses to flaunt it as he prays before an open window facing Jerusalem under decree of death (Daniel 6:11).

The Struggles of Today's Times

As Jews today, many of us still grapple with navigating our identities as

Jews in the Diaspora. What we are presented with in both these stories are two unique and somewhat contradictory models of how to respond, exist and even thrive in exile. The story of Daniel carries a message of overt and defiant Jewish identity predicated on a total refusal to assimilate not only religiously but intellectually, culturally or emotionally. Daniel's refusal to even ingest foreign foods signals an opposition to even consider valuable wisdom in an alien society. It is a model in which foreign wisdom is resisted and political considerations are relegated to secondary. Esther, on the other hand, is a story of a closed Jewish identity centered on a willingness to adapt to everything: foreign lifestyles, language, foods and dress. It is a model in which outside wisdom is valued and harnessed to help empower the individual. Yet it also serves to strip away any explicit Jewish identity. Throughout Jewish history, these paradigms personified by Esther and Daniel resonated with some and were eschewed by others. Of all the Dead Sea scrolls

and fragments unearthed, not a single passage of Esther has been uncovered.³ Perhaps this is not surprising, as this ethos central to the Book of Esther is antithetical to the code and character of those desert communes. On the other hand, there is no holiday celebrating Daniel; it is only Purim immortalizing the example of Esther.

Which brings us back to our delicious hamantaschen — after all, what are our hamantaschen? Are they not just a scrumptious amalgamation of these two philosophies? It is a poppy seed core — symbolic of Daniel's defiance and his refusal to become a consumer of foreign culture — surrounded by sugary dough — the quintessential food of high culture — in a symbolic pocket acting as a cover for identity. It is this contradictory food that is eaten on Purim — the day devoted to celebrating Esther's covert mode of Jewish identity! Even the pastry eaten on the day of Esther cannot totally ignore the example of Daniel. Together, the hamantaschen forms a resounding message for all of us and a

reminder of the need to always work to synthesize the paradigm of Esther and the outlook of Daniel — engaged in the world around us, seeking to uncover and integrate the best of our foreign realities and, at the same time, always being aware and committed to never being defiled or defined by outside values.

Endnotes

1 I would like to thank my brother Yoni for his comments and revisions to this piece, and Dr. Aaron Koller for sharing with me the core of this idea and inspiring me to continue to pursue the study of Tanakh on ever-deeper levels. For a thorough overview of the scholarship and a thought-provoking discussion of the textual and thematic relationship between Daniel and Esther, see his book *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge U Press, 2015).

2 Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals* (Random House, 1938; Hebrew 1933), p. 270. I came across this piece and the quotation of the *Menucha u-Kedusha* in a fascinating article by Eliezer Brodt (<http://seforim.blogspot.co.il/2007/02/eliezer-brodt-origins-of-hamantaschen-in.html>).

3 Israel Antiquities Authority (http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/learn-about-the-scrolls/scrolls-content?locale=en_US).

The hamantaschen forms a reminder of the need to always work to synthesize the paradigm of Esther and the outlook of Daniel — engaged in the world around us, seeking to uncover and integrate the best of our foreign realities and, at the same time, always being aware and committed to never being defiled or defined by outside values.



Self-Nullification through Inebriation

Henny Youngman once said: When I read about the evils of drinking, I gave up reading.

All jokes aside, the dangers of alcohol are quite alarming. Alcohol plays a role in 60% of all fatal burns, drownings and homicides, 50% of severe traumas, and 40% of fatal motor vehicle accidents, suicides, and falls. People who drink regularly are at greater risk for liver disease, heart disease, bleeding from the stomach, depression, sleep disorders and several types of cancer. An astonishing 17 million Americans fall into the category of alcoholics, men and women who are simply unable to quit drinking, irrespective of the harm it causes them and others.

Yet the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 695:2, quoting the Gemara in *Megillah* (7b), writes that a person must imbibe alcohol and get drunk on Purim, intoxicated until they lack the cognitive clarity to differentiate between the righteous Mordechai and the wicked Haman. Although

How many of us know the backstory behind the clash of Mordechai and Haman? Purim wasn't the first round of their fight.



Rabbi Michael Weingarten

Senior Rabbi, Young Israel of Forest Hills
Fellow, Kollel L'Horaah, RIETS
Chag HaSemikhah 5777

the Rama dissents, arguing that the mitzvah can be fulfilled through other means, many, in practice, adhere to the *Shulchan Aruch's* approach. Purim has thus become synonymous with unfettered indulgence in alcohol, a day of wild revelry and unruly rejoicing.¹

Many of us enjoy the festive atmosphere that alcohol on Purim facilitates. But how many of us have ever stopped to think just how out of character it is, how incongruent this mitzvah is with Judaism's overall mindset and approach? Our religion is generally very cerebral and structured, quite measured and balanced. Copious consumption of alcohol would seem to be antithetical to its values. Furthermore, given the aforementioned health risks of alcohol, excessive drinking on Purim would seem to violate the Torah's mandate of "*v'nishmartem m'ode l'nafshosechem*" (Devarim 4:15), the directive to protect one's own health and wellbeing. Why then did the Chachamim feel compelled to institute this strange mitzvah? What is going on here?!

We're all quite familiar with the basic points of the Purim plot. But how many of us know the backstory and

recognize the historical underpinnings behind the clash of Mordechai and Haman? Purim wasn't the first round of their fight. Over five hundred years earlier, Mordechai's ancestor King Shaul had been commanded by G-d to wipe out the nation of Amalek. On the precipice of success, Shaul decides that it would be inhumane for him to kill Agag, the King of Amalek, whom he had taken captive. In a moment of misplaced mercy, he spares Agag, who lives long enough to father a son, the great-great grandfather of Haman. Due to his deviation from G-d's directive, Hashem takes away Shaul's kingship, giving it to Dovid Hamelech instead.

In his *Sichos Mussar* (Purim 5731), Rav Chaim Shmulevitz poses the following question: What was it about Shaul's sin that was so egregious that necessitated him being punished so harshly? After all, Dovid Hamelech also sinned on multiple occasions and yet G-d allowed him to remain King! Rav Shmulevitz explains that Shaul's mistake stemmed from the value he placed on his own reasoning, the misplaced notion that somehow his own personal ethos could be more just and merciful than G-d's. G-d had explicitly ordered Shaul to kill Agag,

yet in Shaul's eyes this command seemed cruel and antiquated, out of touch with the norms of decent society and polite company. And so Shaul, thinking he knows best, decides to deviate from G-d's directive and spare the life of Agag, an act that ultimately spawned Haman and almost spelled death for the entire Jewish nation. Shaul's sin necessitated his removal from the throne, for his sin stemmed not from a fit of passion, like Dovid's, but rather from a far more sinister source, the delusion that he knew better than G-d, that his own conscience, rather than Hashem's command, was the ultimate moral compass.

Many of us know the famous *Tikunei Zohar* no. 21, which draws a connection between Yom Kippur and Purim. While many explanations have been proffered, I would like to suggest my own. Both Yom Kippur and Purim are days of repentance, festivals of forgiveness. Each year, as we sit down at our Purim seudah, we begin a process of teshuvah, one that reaches its climax at the height of our inebriation. The directive to become intoxicated until we cannot differentiate between Haman and Mordechai is not a call to engage in frivolity, but rather to utilize alcohol to inhibit our reasoning abilities, to submit and serve G-d through

faith alone. The Purim story came about through Shaul's sin, through his placing his own reasoning above G-d's will. Each year, we strive to fix Shaul's mistake by following the Sages' command to get drunk, to impair our cognitive abilities and take a leap of faith, to trust that G-d knows best.

Yet it is not only as atonement for the past that we must inculcate this outlook in ourselves, but also in preparation for the future. The battle with Amalek is not over. A day is coming when we will have to reject our own reasoning and personal qualms and follow G-d's command to utterly destroy Amalek. It is through inebriation on Purim that we seek to instill appreciation of such an attitude within us.

We live in a generation in which the sacred is synonymous with the self, in a world that deifies personal autonomy. In today's society, man's own opinions and moral compass are given credence over his Maker's. One needs to look no further than the story of Shaul to learn the dangers of such an attitude. The *Midrash Tanchuma, Metzora*, teaches us that Shaul, who was merciful to the cruel, was ultimately cruel to the merciful. An individual who lives life based on a personal value system, rather than by G-d's concrete commands, can easily

oscillate from caring to callous, from empathetic to apathetic.

As we sit down to our Purim seudah, let us remind ourselves of the following: first and foremost, of the dangers of alcohol. We must drink judiciously, responsibly, serving as proper examples and role models for our family and friends. If we know based on past experience that our behavior under the influence is substandard, we should not drink excessively, but rather follow the Rama's approach, drinking a small amount of wine and then going to sleep. Second, whether we choose to imbibe or not, let us recognize the message and purpose of such intoxication and the potential for atonement that it provides. For through the nullification of our egos, opinions and personal value systems in favor of G-d's; through *kimu v'kiblu*, reaccepting the Torah's outlook and way of life (Esther 9:27 and *Shabbos* 88a), we will surely merit to see salvation, as the Jews did in Shushan so many years ago.

Endnotes

1. Editor's Note: There is no halachic imperative to drunkenness or intoxication on Purim day (Rama, 695:2, *Mishnah Berura* 695:5, and *Beur Halacha s.v. Ad De'lo Yada*) and with so many young adults we keep our Yeshiva campus dry on Purim.



Purim: The Simcha of Satiation

צדיק אכל לשבע נפשו ובטן רשעים תחסר.
*A righteous person eats to satisfy his soul,
but the stomach of the wicked will lack.*
Mishlei 13:25

The war has been won, the Jews have celebrated, and Esther and Mordechai have successfully enshrined Purim on our calendar. And yet, the Megilla mentions one last detail before the curtain falls on the Purim story:

ישם המלך אחשורש מס על הארץ ואי היים.
King Achashveirosh placed a tax on the mainland and the islands.

Esther 10:1

What does Achashveirosh's tax add to the Purim story? Why in particular is it the concluding narrative comment?

Moreover, while Achashveirosh's lasting legacy was taking from others, we commemorate Purim every year with unique mitzvos of giving to others. How do the mitzvos of *mishloach manos* and *matanos laevyonim* define the joy of Purim and how do they relate to Achashveirosh?

On its surface, *matanos laevyonim* seems to be an expression of the regular mitzva of *tzedaka*. However, the specifics of *matanos laevyonim* reveal it to be of an entirely different nature. One major distinction is recorded in the Talmud Yerushalmi, and subsequently codified by the Rambam¹ and Shulchan Aruch:²

אין מדקדקין במעות פורים אלא כל מי שהוא פושט את ידו ליטול נותנין לו.

We don't investigate recipients of gifts to the poor on Purim, but rather anyone



Rabbi Dani Zuckerman

Fellow, Wexner Kollel Elyon

Chag HaSemikhah 5777

who extends their hand to receive should be given.

Yerushalmi, Megilla 1:4

With regard to the general obligation of *tzedaka*, there is only a mitzva to give money when the petitioner is actually poor. But when it comes to *matanos laevyonim*, it is not the petitioner's need which determines whether one should give, but the very stretching of his arm; the request itself obligates us to give. Why is this so? Why should we give money to a potential phony on Purim just because he asked for it? Is giving indiscriminately even a good thing? It seems like a waste of money that could be put to better use!

Ritva answers by connecting *matanos laevyonim* to the broader mitzva of simcha on Purim. We don't discriminate with *matanos laevyonim* because it is not just a mitzva of *tzedaka*, but a mitzva of sharing and spreading simcha with the whole community. It is an act of turning Purim into a day of communal festivity. We distribute without reservation because *matanos laevyonim* aspires not just to provide for the poor but to spread simcha to all:

שאין מדקדקין בדבר לומר אם הוא עני וראוי ליתן לו אם לא אלא נותנים לכל אדם שיבא ויתבע שאין יום זה מדין צדקה בלבד אלא

מדין שמחה ומנות שהרי אף בעשירים כתיב ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו.

We don't investigate to determine whether he is poor and it is appropriate to give to him or not, rather we give to all who ask. For this day is not one of tzedaka alone, but of joy and gifts. For even in regards to wealthy people it is written, "sending gifts to one another."

Ritva, Bava Metzia 78b

Ritva uses the example of *mishloach manos* to buttress his point that giving on Purim is not only to fill a need, but to spread joy to all. If *mishloach manos* are given even to the wealthiest people, as an expression of goodwill and festivity, *matanos laevyonim* can be similarly distributed even to those who are not destitute.

Ritva's approach sheds a new light on the giving we do on Purim day. While *mishloach manos* and *matanos laevyonim* differ in their details, they are in fact two branches growing from a common root. It is only because they share a common root that Ritva can bring a proof from *mishloach manos* to *matanos laevyonim*. Rambam similarly expresses the common root of *mishloach manos* and *matanos laevyonim* when he prioritizes the latter over the former:

מוטב לאדם להרבות במתנות אביונים מלהרבות בסעודתו ובשלוח מנות לרעיו, שאין

שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה אלא לשמח לב
עניים ויתומים ואלמנות וגרים, שהמשמח
לב האמללים האלו דומה לשכינה שנאמר
להחיות רוח שפלים ולהחיות לב נדכאים.

It is better for a person to give more gifts to the poor than to be lavish in his Purim feast or in sending gifts to his friends. For there is no greater and more splendid joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the converts. For one who gladdens the hearts of these unfortunate individuals resembles the Divine Presence, [about whom] it says, "to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive those with broken hearts."

Rambam, Hilchos Megilla 2:16

Why is the "greater and more splendid joy" the litmus test by which we choose mitzvos on Purim? We don't find a similar comparison or ranking of mitzvos on any other holiday! Rambam's hierarchy is only logical because he too understands *mishloach manos* and *matanos laevyonim* as particular mitzvos that express one common, broader theme of the day; radiating our joy outwards to other members of the community.³

Dispensing money indiscriminately is foolish and wasteful only if one's focus is to identify needs

and fill them. However, who can afford to discriminate when he is so overflowing with simcha and gratitude? If one is so full of joy that he can't bear to withhold it from others, then it is no longer their needs that drive him, but his desire to share his joy with them.

Let us now return to Achashveirosh. Why indeed does the Megilla conclude with his tax? Maharal⁴ notes that Chazal compare the Persian Empire — with Achashveirosh at its head — to a bear, because of its insatiable appetite that knows no rest.⁵ The Megilla begins by describing Achashveirosh's appetite for lavish, licentious, gluttonous parties and concludes with his similarly limitless appetite for money. Maharal goes one step further and identifies the source of Achashveirosh's voracious appetites: his inner sense of emptiness. As wealthy and powerful as he was, Achashveirosh felt a constant need to acquire more.⁶

As the Megilla ends, we are reminded of the stark contrast between the hedonistic world of the Persian Empire and the generosity of spirit that characterizes Purim. The unique mitzvos of *mishloach manos* and

matanos laevyonim define the joy of Purim. We give without reservation because Hashem's miraculous intervention generates such an extreme sense of gratitude, simcha, and completeness that — unlike Achashveirosh — we simply overflow in our efforts to bring that joy to others. Just when we thought the story was over, the Megilla interjects with a seemingly irrelevant historical comment. In reality, though, it is one that serves to define our mindset and obligations as we celebrate the holiday of Purim.

Endnotes

1 Hilchos Megillah 2:16.

2 Orach Chaim 694:3.

3 See *Harerei Kedem* Vol. 1 *siman* 206. Cf. Rambam, *Hilchos Chanuka* 4:14, where he compares mitzvos based on competing values rather than a common value.

4 *Ner Mitzva* pg. 11 *d"h Viamru biperek asara yuchsin*. Cf. *Or Chadash* 10:1 where Maharal provides two alternative explanations.

5 *Kiddushin* 72a.

6 Haman expresses similar sentiments when he declares "*vichol zeh einenu shoveh li*." See *Or Chadash Pesicha d"h Rabi Abba bar Kahana* and *ibid.*, 5:13. See also Rashi *Vayishlach* 33:11 on Yaakov and Esav's contrasting attitudes in this regard.

R. Moshe Sofer, *Derashot Chatam Sofer, derasha* for the 7th of Adar II 5594, offers an aggadic explanation for the law that we must provide to anyone who asks for charity on Purim, even those who may not be worthy. He explains that the essence of the Purim story is about the Jewish people, who were distant from HaShem and undeserving of His mercy. Yet they asked for His mercy and He responded with kindness. If HaShem was willing to provide to those who are not worthy, on Purim, we too should do the same. *Chatam Sofer* adds that we can actually see a textual hint to this law. The Megillah specifically refers to this mitzvah as *matanot la'evyonim* and not *matanot la'aniyim* or *matanot ladalim*. While all of these terms could be translated as gifts to the poor, the word *evyon* can sometimes refer to someone undeserving. Rambam, *Hilchos Sanhedrin* 20:5, codifies the ruling of the *Mechilta, Mishpatim* no. 20, commenting on the prohibition against perverting the justice of the *evyon*, that an *evyon*, as opposed to a *dal*, is someone who can't be trusted because of previous evil acts. One must still offer the *evyon* a fair trial. *Chatam Sofer* notes that while ordinarily, one might prioritize the *dal* over the *evyon* in giving charity, on Purim, one should not distinguish.

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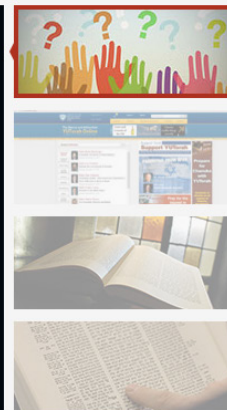
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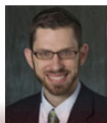
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