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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

We generally relate to Purim as a celebration of salvation for the Jewish people. However, the Gemara in *Shabbos* conveys an additional dimension to the story that represents an epic moment in defining the entire nature of Am Yisrael's relationship to Torah and our mandate as a people. The original depiction of Matan Torah involved a mountain suspended over the entire Jewish people in coercing the affirming response of *na'aseh venishmah* — we will do and we will listen:

"ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר" (שמות, י"ט, יז).
אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם.
"And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount" (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: [the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial.
Shabbos 88a

Rav Acha noted that for the next significant period of Jewish history, our commitment to Jewish law and tradition would be anchored in an acceptance that was forced, thus undermining the veracity of our personal initiative in accepting the Torah.

Yet, explains Rava, in the aftermath of the Purim story, that commitment would be renewed, this time, without the mountain over our heads, providing a foundation of commitment that is entirely of our own free will:



Rabbi Yaakov Glasser

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

אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש; דכתיב (אסתר ט', כז) "קיימו וקבלו היהודים" - קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר
Rava said, Even so, they again accepted it in the time of Achashverosh, as it is written: "They ordained and took upon them..." (Esther 9:27); they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

Rav Yerucham Levovitz, *Da'as Chochma Umussar* 1:28, wonders how it is possible that the generation liberated from Mitzrayim would engage in an incomplete acceptance of the Torah, while the generation of the Purim story, seemingly a more assimilated and challenged generation, would be the ones to concretize our enduring commitment and connection to Torah.

He answers that while the generation of the Exodus were certainly on a higher spiritual level, the generation of Mordechai and Esther discovered their spiritual destiny in a world concealed of G-d's presence. True kabbalas Hatorah, is not in accepting the obvious and the revealed. True kabbalas Hatorah, is in searching for the truth, in a world of darkness and confusion.

Our generation struggles deeply with our own personal kabbalas Hatorah. In a world in which G-d's presence is often concealed, persevering in our commitment to Torah and mitzvos is

an extraordinary expression of faith and religious fortitude.

For the current issue of *Torah To Go*, we invited yeshiva high schools from across North America to submit a d'var Torah from a faculty member. These outstanding professionals partner with us every day in the larger quest of educating and inspiring the next generation. Institutionally, we share a common goal of guiding young people to discover the passion and purpose of Torah in a complex and difficult world. These educators are the heroes of our generation, in transmitting our *mesorah* with substance, passion, and love. Their entire lives are devoted to empowering each and every student to reach their own moment of "*kimu mah shekiblu kvar*" — to embrace that which has been accepted by them in the past. Many of our young people grow up with their own mountain over their heads — an expectation that their religious life will proceed and endure. The Jewish educators of our community are responsible for inspiring a sense of aspiration and motivation within the hearts and minds, to ensure a perpetuating commitment to the values and ideals of Torah.

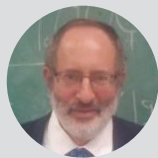
The Winning Ticket

As a *mechanech* (educator) for many years, I often ask myself what message a midrash or other statement of Chazal might have that is relevant to chinuch.

While there is an expression “chinuch begins in the home,” this does not, of course, minimize the importance of the rebbe or morah. In fact, one can say that in many ways, a student’s home is, in part, in the yeshiva. With parents forced to be preoccupied with mundane tasks, there is more reliance on the yeshiva to be a primary source of chinuch. The key then to the very survival of Am Yisroel, in the face of so many challenges from technology and other social pressures, is the bastion of spirituality — the yeshiva.

Purim is the one holiday that is based on the most credible threat of total annihilation of the Jewish People that we ever faced. It follows that Purim should relate to the *mechanech*, since chinuch is the key to the continuity of Am Yisroel. The following then is a thought that focuses on this hypothesis, and one which I hope and pray that I can live up to.

The Talmud in *Megillah* (13b) tells us a fascinating fact regarding the thought process of Haman in his plan to destroy Am Yisroel. The Talmud finds deep significance in the lottery that Haman made in order to establish the date on which he would execute his plan to destroy Am Yisroel. It says in *Megillat Esther* (3:7) “*hu chodesh Adar*” — that it, the lottery fell on the month of Adar. This would be the month to establish the date for Haman’s evil plan. On these words, the Talmud informs us that Haman



Rabbi Eliyahu Alpert

Faculty, Hebrew Academy of Nassau County

Uniondale, NY

was filled with joy when the lottery fell on the month of Adar. The reason for Haman’s “simcha” was the fact that this was the month that Moshe Rabbeinu passed away. Even Haman knew of the great Moshe Rabbeinu, the great leader of Am Yisroel, and who Am Yisroel referred to as their rebbe. It was through Moshe that we left Egypt and built a Mishkan — a tabernacle. If the leader that was so integral to the birth of Am Yisroel was taken away in Adar, then Adar is, indeed, the ideal month to annihilate Am Yisroel. Thus, Haman rejoiced over the apparent success of the lottery foretelling the success of his mission.



The Talmud then proceeds to belittle Haman’s excitement. The Talmud explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was born on the seventh of Adar. At first glance, the Talmud appears to be saying that Adar is not an unlucky month, for Moshe Rabbeinu was also born in this month. The birth of a

baby is a cause for great celebration; thus, the fact Moshe was born in this month proves that Adar is actually a “positive” month for Am Yisroel. However, there are several difficulties with this interpretation.

Let us for a moment imagine that we were present at the time that Moshe Rabbeinu was *niftar* (departed this world). Would we be comforted on any level by the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu was born in the month that he died? If we look at the end of the Chumash in Parashat V’zot Habrachah, we only see the Torah’s description of Am Yisroel’s deep mourning for Moshe. There is no mention of anyone taking comfort from the fact that Moshe was also born in that month. Accordingly, Haman seems to be correct in his assessment that Adar is a difficult month for Am Yisroel. We lost Moshe’s merit, his leadership, his humility, and his unwavering devotion to us. Where is the consolation in the fact that he was born in this month?

A second question comes from the fact that as much of a rasha as Haman was, he was an equally brilliant politician and strategist. And with all his detailed research and planning, how could he have not known when Moshe Rabbeinu was born?

Perhaps we can answer these questions with a fascinating comment

made by Rashi in Chumash Devarim 31:29. In that context, Moshe tells Bnei Yisroel that he is being so diligent in committing them to remain faithful to Hashem and His Torah because Am Yisroel will, in fact, turn away from Torah and mitzvot after he dies. Thus Moshe's goal is to minimize this effect by imbuing Am Yisroel with enough fervor to ultimately return to Hashem after they fail. Rashi notes that Moshe seems to be prophesizing about an event that never took place. The Navi clearly tells us that the Jews remained loyal to the Torah as long as Yehoshuah, Moshe's primary student and his successor, was alive. What, then, is the meaning of Moshe's prophecy?

Rashi answers that we see from here that Moshe considered his student, Yehoshuah, an extension of himself. In other words, Moshe loved and appreciated Yehoshuah so much that his devotion to Yehoshuah made Yehoshuah's leadership a part of Moshe's! Rashi explains that Moshe considered himself alive through Yehoshuah even after he physically died. It seems that the Torah can state something that is not true physically because of a spiritual bond between two people. Moshe, because of his close connection to Yehoshuah, has a right to say that after he dies, Am Yisroel will begin to sin even though in reality this did not occur until after the death of Yehoshuah!

There is a message here that is very relevant to educating our children. Moshe is teaching us that his relationship with Yehoshuah is the reason that Am Yisroel will stay on the path of Torah and mitzvot even after he dies. The legacy of Moshe Rabbeinu continued in Am Yisroel because of Yehoshuah's loyalty and

devotion to Moshe. Because of this loyalty, the Jews also remained loyal to Hashem and His messenger, Moshe. Moshe knew that Am Yisroel would eventually falter because he knew that the special rebbe-talmid relationship would not continue in the same way after Yehoshuah. The lesson is clear: a rebbe must see his talmid as an actual extension of himself. This seems to go beyond the usual mitzvah of *ve'ahavta l'arayacha kamocha*, for it is not simply loving another like oneself, but as one entity — as oneself.

Recently, I read an article in *Hamodia* on the life of Rav Aharon Leib Shteinman, zt'l, who recently passed away. They interviewed Rabbi Yisroel Friedman, the editor-in-chief of the *Yated Neeman* newspaper, who was frequently in the presence of Rav Shteinman for over twenty years. Rabbi Friedman was asked what advice he had for parents whose children had "gone off the derech." Rabbi Friedman replied, "in general, the only *kinyan* (acquisition) that works with this generation is *meshichah* — drawing them close. Nothing else works. He (Rav Shteinman) would say you must love the child, love the child, love the child. Love your children." In a later paragraph, Rabbi Friedman explained that when it came to kiruv, Rav Shteinman emphasized never giving up and seeking to bring them back with "*meshichah*" — drawing close with relatively unconditional love. This is the same message that we learn from the relationship between Moshe and Yehoshuah.

This message helps us understand Haman's mistake. Moshe did not pass away in Adar. Moshe lived on through Yehoshuah. True, Adar is the month that Moshe died physically. Haman

was correct that Moshe died in Adar and he likely knew that Moshe was also born in Adar. However, Haman looked at the superficial result, which was that Moshe was taken from us physically in Adar. He saw this as a good omen for the success of his plan. The Talmud states that he was wrong because Moshe was born in this month. Perhaps this can be interpreted in a homiletical and metaphysical sense. Moshe did not "die," for Yehoshuah lived on as an extension of Moshe. Perhaps the Talmud then can mean that Moshe was actually reborn in Adar as it says "*vezarach hashemesh uva hashemesh*" — the sun rises and the sun sets (Kohelet 1:5). It follows that Adar has no negative implications at all, for Moshe in fact did not die in this month.

True, at the time Moshe "died," we took no comfort in the fact that Moshe was born in that month. However, as Am Yisroel continued the legacy of Moshe through Yehoshuah, we look back and see that Moshe still lived in Adar, and that was Haman's mistake.

Purim is a celebration of the tremendous power of the rebbe-talmid relationship. With all of his brilliant plots and machinations, Haman lacked the ability to comprehend the message that a rebbe can live on through his student. This miscalculation led to his downfall. *Venahafoch hu* — Moshe was turned into Yehoshuah and was and is alive in our hearts and minds. Those who are blessed to be in the field of chinuch have a tremendous responsibility as they hold the future of their talmidim in their hands. This is *avodat hakodesh* and we must treat it with the utmost care and devotion.

Accepting the Torah through Hidden Miracles

The holiday of Purim is certainly associated with happiness and rejoicing over the salvation that the Jewish people enjoyed in the days of the Persian Empire. It is also known as a day in which the Torah was reaccepted willingly. The Gemara (*Shabbos* 88a) tells us:

ויתצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר.

“And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: [the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said: From here is a substantial caveat to [the obligation to fulfill] the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted it in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “They ordained and took upon them...” (Esther 9:27); they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

The Gemara teaches us that our first acceptance of the Torah was flawed, since it was forced upon us. We therefore reaccepted it in the days



Rabbi Yehuda Balsam

Faculty, DRS Yeshiva High School

Woodmere, NY

of Purim, as the Megilah hints to us by telling us, “*kimu v’kiblu*,” (Esther 9:27) we upheld and accepted the days of Purim, as opposed to merely accepting them. Thus, the acceptance of Purim constitutes an upholding of our original *kabbalas haTorah*. How is this so? The Maharal (*Chiddushei Aggados* ad. loc. and *Tiferes Yisrael* chap. 35) explains that when B’nei

the Jews demonstrated that they view the Torah as a privilege and an opportunity for spiritual growth and achievement, and not as a yoke that was thrust upon their collective neck.

Based on this approach, we can answer the questions of the Ramban (ad loc. s.v. *V’ha*). He wonders why the Jews were punished for their sins and exiled from the land if they had never, in fact, accepted the Torah. The Ramban himself answers that although B’nei Yisrael lacked a formal acceptance, they were still benefitting from the blessings and promises within the Torah. In order to continue to reap its rewards, they were obligated to uphold the mitzvos as their end of the deal.

However, with the Maharal’s thesis in mind, we can suggest that the Jews had indeed accepted the Torah at Har Sinai. Nevertheless, since its presentation was done in a way that seemed “forced,” one could claim that they had never truly agreed to take it. Thus the acceptance of Purim served as proof that the Jews were indeed fully satisfied with the agreement that had been made all those years ago, and a new acceptance was not necessary.



Yisrael accepted the new holiday of Purim, they demonstrated a tacit approval of their acceptance of the entire Torah. One who is obligated to perform unwanted tasks and is under the strain of heavy burdens would surely not voluntarily choose to increase his workload. By agreeing to add to their extensive list of obligations and restrictions,

This idea can be taken to the next level based on the comments of the *Meshech Chochmah* (Dev. 19:17 s.v. *Vayisatzvu*). He suggests that the words of Chazal, that Hashem suspended the mountain above our heads, are not meant to be taken literally. Rather, the revelation at Sinai was so intense and impressive, it made abundantly clear to all the Jews that the world had been created specifically for this moment and this mission. Thus B'nei Yisrael were left with no free will to possibly refuse the Torah, because that would be tantamount to rejecting life itself. The *Meshech Chochmah's* explanation of these events gives us further insight into the greatness of the acceptance of Purim. The problem inherent in the *kabbalas haTorah* at Sinai is that it was presented in conjunction with awesome and powerful miracles. Hashem's glory descended to our world and demonstrated that there is no other path in life for our nation than that of the Torah, thereby tainting the purity of our *kabbalah*. Therefore, Purim constitutes the perfect solution to this deficiency. Not only was the new holiday accepted willingly by the Jewish people, but its mere recognition as a miracle demonstrated the nation's desire to see the hand of God in everyday events. Indeed, we are aware that the name of Hashem does not appear anywhere in the Megilah. It is certainly possible to view the Purim story as a tale of political maneuvering and espionage. Our recognition that Hashem was behind the curtain pulling the strings of each of the players is a product of

our understanding that everything in our lives is subject to direct divine providence and intervention. Thus, the problem of the Torah being given with open miracles is solved by the Jewish people's celebration of the hidden miracles that protect us always and provided for our salvation at that time.

Based on this idea, we can perhaps understand a particular position of the Rambam. The Gemara (*Megilah* 14a, *Arachin* 10b) offers three reasons why Hallel is not recited on Purim: First, we do not recite Hallel over a miracle that takes place in the diaspora. Second, reading the Megilah constitutes the recitation of Hallel. Third, we were still servants of Achashverosh following the Purim story.

The Meiri (s.v. *Davar*) writes that if one is to accept the second answer, that we do recite Hallel on Purim in the form of the Megilah, then one who finds himself without a Megilah on Purim is obligated to recite the regular Hallel. However, the Rambam (*Hilchos Megilah* 3:6) overtly accepts the second approach, stating that the chachamim did not establish the recitation of Hallel on Purim because the Megilah is Hallel. However, he makes no mention of the Meiri's ruling for one who lacks the ability to read the Megilah. Indeed, the fact that he writes that Hallel was not instituted on Purim indicates that one would not recite Hallel under any circumstances.

To explain this ruling, it is necessary to see another comment of the Gemara (*Shabbos* 118b). The

Talmud cites a statement of Rabbi Yosi Haglili that it is extremely positive to recite Hallel every day. The Gemara questions this practice as being tantamount to blasphemy and explains that there are two types of Hallel. The main Hallel is to be recited only on special occasions, but the Hallel to which Rabbi Yosi Haglili refers to is *Pesukei D'zimra*. What we see from this Gemara is that *Pesukei D'zimra* contains praises of Hashem that are to be recited regularly, as they differ from those in the holiday version of Hallel. The Hallel of Yom Tov praises Hashem for the open miracles that He performs and should therefore not be recited on a regular basis, as these miracles are extremely rare. *Pesukei D'zimra*, on the other hand, thanks God for the everyday nissim, and allows us to appreciate the seemingly mundane natural occurrences as work of the divine hand. Perhaps the same can be said for the Rambam's opinion. Chazal did not establish the recitation of Hallel on Purim, since Purim is the celebration of the hidden miracle. Reading the Megilah itself, not as a mundane story, but as a *pirsum haneis*, a demonstration of God's providence in our lives, is the only appropriate and effective Hallel that should be recited on Purim.

May we merit internalizing the messages of Purim learn to appreciate the hidden miracles in our lives, and merit to see the day that God reveals Himself with the ultimate redemption.



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Amalek and the Stunning Power of Spiritual Genetics

The mitzvah to destroy Amalek is one that may leave an inquisitive mind with more questions than answers. This article will not focus on the broader issues raised by a seeming obligation to wipe out an entire nation, but rather on one, narrow aspect that seems to conflict with an established Torah principle. In *Parashat Ki Teitzei* we are taught:

לֹא יוּמָתוּ אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וּבָנִים לֹא יוּמָתוּ עַל אָבוֹת אִישׁ בְּחֻטְאוֹ יוּמָתוּ.

A person dies for his/her own sins, not for the sins of his/her parents or children.

Devarim 24:16

This is both intuitive and just; why should my children be punished for my misdeeds? Yet just a few verses later we learn of the obligation to destroy Amalek. The reason given is:

אֲשֶׁר קִרַּךְ בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בָּךְ כָּל הַנְּחֻשְׁלִים אַחֲרָיִךְ וְאַתָּה עִיף וְיָגַע וְלֹא יָרָא אֱלֹקִים.

That they [Amalek nation] happened upon you on the way [out of Mitzrayim] and attacked the exhausted stragglers in the rear, and he [Amalek nation] did not fear G-d.

Devarim 25:18

All Jews are then obligated to continue this reprisal for all generations in response to a sin committed by the Amalekite's ancestors in previous generations. This example of vicarious liability seems to fly in the face of the rule of individual accountability articulated in the previous chapter.¹ While Amalek is the case where the



Rabbi Donny Besser

Faculty and Mashgiach Ruchani,

Maayanot Yeshiva High School for Girls, Teaneck, NJ

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stakes are highest, it is by no means the only instance in the Torah that seems to penalize children for their parents' misdeeds. A mamzer's status is the direct result of a parent's (or ancestor's) forbidden relationship (Devarim 23:3). K'na'an's children seem to have been condemned to eternal slavery for his and his father's sin (Bereishit 9:25). We are all still accountable for significant historical sins like the sale of Yosef or the sin of the Golden Calf; even for the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Descendants of Amon and Moav still pay the price for the lack of hospitality exhibited many generations ago (Devarim 23:4). While it does not offend our sensibilities as much, the same question exists in the other direction. The concept of *zechut avot* means that each Jewish person still benefits from the righteousness of our forefathers and foremothers. Kohanim and Leviim did not earn their exalted, inherited status, and while Mashiach will certainly need to have his own resume, it will be his membership in the Tribe of Yehuda and the Kingdom

of David that grants him eligibility for the position. Does G-d work on the same legacy system people disdain in elite universities?

Perhaps a key to understanding this issue is the following distinction: Children are not punished for their parents' actions. This is both intuitively unfair, and refuted by the verse cited above. No one disputes, however, that the actions of parents can affect the circumstances into which their children are born, and in which they grow up. As an extreme example, a woman who smokes crack cocaine throughout her pregnancy will harm her innocent child. The same with parents who choose to waste all their money on lottery tickets rather than properly feed their children. Actions have consequences that extend beyond the actors themselves to the people around them. This does not make these consequences "fair," but it at least puts them into a framework that is easier to recognize.

Perhaps what seems normal to us in the physical, natural world may also be true in the spiritual, supernatural realm as well. We are used to the realization that our world is bound by science; that our lives are governed

by the rules of physics, chemistry and biology. The Torah teaches that in addition to these, there is another, religious dimension, invisible even under a microscope, but no less real. These rules govern the world of purity and impurity or ritual sanctity of the Beit Hamikdash and its offerings.

The Ramban writes repeatedly about the fundamental principle of “*ma’aseh avot siman labanim*” — the actions of the father are a sign for the children. He views this as going far beyond a simple mandate for us to learn the lessons of history. He quotes the midrash that *kol mah she’ira la’avot siman labanim* — anything that happened to the Avot was a sign to the children as a cosmic historical determinant. When the forefathers performed an action — good or bad — it infused a power or deficiency into their descendants that would surface repeatedly throughout history.² The choices made by Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov deeply affected the religious DNA they passed on to the Jewish nation. We are chosen not because of any inclination embedded into Avraham’s genetic code, but because of the concrete actions he took and the decisions he made. Presumably, this is not a miraculous aberration of nature but the way the world works. Our ancestors chose to say *na’aseh v’nishmah*, we will do and (then) we will listen, and we retain the benefits of that choice far beyond the transaction of *kabalat Hatorah*. While subsequent actions are more limited in their scope, as Yaakov was our last shared forefather, the heroic behavior of Yehuda and Aharon also impacted their spiritual genetic legacy to create the *malchut* and *kehunah* respectively.

Amalek’s children are condemned through no fault of their own, but that is an inherited status based on the

decisions made by their ancestors, the same way that our status as Jews is based on our parents’ response of *na’aseh v’nishmah*, or Avraham finding Hashem. A person’s circumstance won’t determine whether or not he gets to the World to Come — it will just determine the challenges he will have to face to get there.

We are, of course, still far from fully grasping the mitzva to annihilate Amalek. The nexus between crime and punishment seems harsh, and our reward for the good acts of our ancestors, generous. Still, it is valuable to recognize that the same way that the natural world has consequences that extend outside of the actors themselves, the metaphysical world is no less real and has its own systematic rules in which actions lead to results that strike us as less than fair to the victims.

This seems to point to a difference between the mechanics of physical genetics as opposed to spiritual genetics. Since Darwin, scientists have assumed that our biological genetics are determined at conception. Nothing we do can alter the genetic legacy we pass on to our children.³ Even a mother, who during pregnancy can still influence the health of her child, is unable to affect the “nature” part of her maternal contribution after birth. The Torah seems to be teaching us that spiritual genes work differently.

The message of all of these examples is that unlike biology, the religious genetic legacy that we each leave our children is in constant flux, changing based on our every deed. Amalek is not our enemy because they were inclined to attack us, but because they acted on that inclination — a decision in their adult lives that had a profound impact on their offspring. So too, we are a chosen nation not

due to Avraham’s impulses, but for his choices. This has implications that are comforting and terrifying, raising the stakes of our own religious choices. No longer are the consequences of our actions limited to ourselves, but with every choice we make we leave a deep, lasting impact on our children, grandchildren and all of our future generations. On Purim we celebrate the defeat of Amalek and the ability to conquer the Amalek within ourselves, and set into motion a positive ripple effect into eternity with this victory.

Endnotes

1 See http://alhatorah.org/Are_Children_Punished_for_Parents%27_Sins/5 for dozens of sources on this subject. See also, Rabbi Hayyim Angel at <https://library.yct Torah.org/files/2016/09/The-Person-Who-Sins-He-Shall-Die.pdf> for a comprehensive survey of different approaches to the problem, including other seemingly conflicting indications from elsewhere in the Torah, as well as the books of Yirmiyau and Yechezkel. Many of the commentaries he cites interpret the former verse as unrelated to vicarious liability, but instead follow a strand in Chazal that teaches that a family member may not, and is thus shielded from having to, testify against his relative.

2 Ramban’s *Commentary on the Torah*, Bereishit 12:6, 12:10, 14:1, 16:6, 26:20 and 29:2. See a helpful analysis from Rabbi Alex Israel at <http://www.alexisrael.org/lech-lecha--maaseh-avot> and <http://www.alexisrael.org/vayishlach-history-repeats-itself>.

3 Listen to <http://www.radiolab.org/story/251876-inheritance/> for the fascinating backstory of the ugly history and surprising resurrection of epigenetics as a serious field of scientific study, including experiments involving loving mother rats who lick their children and those involving starving pre-adolescent Swedes. See also, the controversial work of Dr. Rachel Yehuda and her research arguing that the trauma suffered by Holocaust victims made their children more susceptible genetically to PTSD.

Menucha V'Simcha Ohr LaYehudim: Commemorating Shabbos & Amalek

While the custom of reading Parashas Zachor on Shabbos may be based on practical considerations, the *Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Seitzei*, finds a connection between the ideas of Shabbos and destroying Amalek. Based on the similar command, “zachor” — to remember — that is used for each obligation, the midrash concludes that “*sh'neyhem shavin*” — the two mitzvot are equivalent. In what ways are these ideas similar? Is every idea we are told to remember equivalent, or did Chazal see some special connection between Shabbos and Amalek?

If we look carefully at Parashas Zachor, there is another word that the Torah uses that also reminds us of Shabbos. We only are commanded to destroy Amalek “*b'haniach Hashem Elokecha oscha mikol oy'vecha misaviv*” — when G-d allows you to rest from all those around you (Devarim 25:19). Like Shabbos, the mitzvah of *zechiras Amalek* must be accomplished in a time of *menucha*, rest. This connection between Amalek and *menucha* is furthered in Megillas Esther. The celebration of Purim does not commemorate the days that the Jews were actively fighting the war against their enemies. Even though these are the days when the Jews were victorious in overturning Haman's decree and defeating their enemies, Purim celebrates the day when the Jews rested from their enemies — “*v'noach mei'oyveihem*.” (Esther 9:16) Why must this holiday, like the battle against Amalek, only occur when there is time to rest?



Rabbi Yehuda Chanales

Faculty, Fuchs Mizrahi School, Beachwood, Ohio



FUCHS MIZRACHI SCHOOL

In the modern world, rest and relaxation are valued as a way to take time off, forget about the rush of our daily routine and simply enjoy ourselves. While that certainly is part of the “*menucha*” we experience on Shabbos, resting on shabbos also gives an opportunity to take a step back and consider the previous and upcoming weeks. When Hashem rested on the first Shabbos of creation, He was able to look not only at the events of the previous day or two, but at “*kol asher asah*” (everything He made) and proclaim “*v'hinei tov m'od*” (behold it is very good). Only after the six days of work are complete and “we throw away our hammer with nothing left to do” (as one famous song tells us), can we reflect and internalize the lessons of our successes and challenges. Psychologists tell us that true change requires shifting perspectives which in turn requires time to consider the “bigger picture” of things.

Attacking the weak and weary, Amalek preyed on the Jews when they were “*ayef v'yagea*,” lacking the time or energy to be “*yarei Elokim*.” According to Chazal, Amalek questioned the Jews' spiritual commitment to Hashem and did so to those who were incapable of reflecting or examining how to

properly respond. Therefore, our battle against Amalek not only seeks physical destruction but uprooting the opportunism that Amalek represents. Similarly, throughout the Megillah, Achashveirosh and Haman are both presented as characters who make decisions without considering the broader implications of their decisions. Achashveirosh is angered by Vashti's refusal to appear before him, and in his anger, chooses to send her away (the next chapter begins by telling us that after “the king's anger subsided” he regretted his decision regarding Vashti). Haman is angered by Mordechai's refusal to bow down, and chooses to run to the king and demand Mordechai's execution. For the Jewish People to appreciate the true miraculous nature of their being saved, they must be capable of looking beyond the moment and recognizing Hashem's hand in the entire story.

Amalek can only be destroyed “*b'haniach Hashem Elokecha oscha mikol oy'vecha misaviv*,” when G-d provides rest from all of your enemies. Purim may only be celebrated on the day after the battle, the day of “*noach me'oyveihem*.” It is only befitting that on the day of reflection and commemoration we celebrate each week, we have the custom of remembering those who attempted to take opportunities like these away from us.

Mordekhai, Son of Yair

Everyone loves a hero; we glorify them and recount epic sagas telling of their great deeds and valor. But, truth to tell, who is the greater hero? The person who was born to greatness or the individual who fought against his own internal weakness and overcame obstacles to act heroically? Our tradition seems to favor the latter. “Even a completely righteous person cannot stand in the place of a true penitent.”¹ R. Yehuda haNassi averred that the “great” Eliezer b. Durdia was able to “acquire his world” in one moment of absolute turnaround.² Despite this tradition, we prefer to see our heroes, Biblical, classical and modern, as having been born as angels. We love to read of their spiritual and academic achievements from their youngest years.

In this spirit, many will read the story of Mordekhai and Esther as a tale of two unblemished heroes, who infiltrate Ahashverosh’s court in order to save the Jews. Megilat Esther, however, tells a different story, one that speaks to us and allows these giants of our history to serve as true role models. Hagiography makes the hero inaccessible and impossible to emulate. How can any of us strive to be an Avraham Avinu if he never took a faulty step on his way to eternal greatness? How can David, our king, inspire purity of spirit in the rest of us if he never fell — and then got up, dusted himself off, and resumed his valiant march to assume his vaunted place in Jewish history?

Mordekhai is introduced as follows:



Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

Rosh Beit Midrash, YULA Girls’ School

Chair of the Bible Department, YULA Boys’ School

Los Angeles, CA

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וְשְׁמוֹ מֵרְדֵּכָי בֶּן
יָאִיר בֶּן שִׁמְעִי בֶּן קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָה
מִירוּשָׁלַיִם עִם הַגָּלָה אֲשֶׁר הִגְלָתָה עִם יְכָנְיָה
מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה ...

There was a Judean man in Shushan, the fortified city, his name being Mordekhai, son of Yair, son of Shim'i, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who was exiled from Yerushalayim, with the emigres that were exiled with Yekhonyah, king of Yehuda...

Esther 2:5-6.



**YULA GIRLS
HIGH SCHOOL**

Although the Midrash interprets the names of his forbearers as appellations accorded to Mordekhai himself, the simple *peshat* is that the text is listing his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. This should catch our attention. We are accustomed to being introduced to characters in Tanakh with, at most, a patronym. Introducing three generations of ancestors is unusual and begs an explanation. In addition, the names

Kish, Shim'i and Ya'ir are Hebrew names common to the Rahelite tribes. Divrei Hayamim I, 1-10, demonstrates that names were common to particular tribes. We aren't surprised to learn that this Benjaminite had a Ya'ir, Shim'i and Kish in his family tree. But what are we to make of the name Mordekhai, which has no antecedents in any Israelite tribe? Haza'l were sensitive to this anomaly and suggested that Mordekhai had a Hebrew name — Petahya³ — implying that Mordekhai was his “secular” name. Indeed, modern scholarship is nearly unanimous in maintaining that Mordekhai was not only a secular name, but a pagan name, a form of Marduk, the head of the Persian pantheon (adopted from the Sumerian tradition). Why is a Jew, a member of Binyamin, identified by such a name? A related question may be posed about the unidentified *asher* at the beginning of v. 6 — who was it that was exiled from Yerushalayim?

Following the best historic records available, Xerxes (the likely “Ahashverosh” of our Megila) ruled from 485-465 BCE, which places our story as beginning (in the third year of his reign) approximately 115 years after the exile of Yekhonya. The simplest explanation for all of

this is as follows: Kish, Mordekhai's great-grandfather, was exiled with the aristocracy and artisans with Yekhonyah. Mordekhai was a second/third-generation Persian Jew, born and raised in exile. As history attests — even as recent as the 20th century — Jews typically maintain cultural ties to the “old country,” including names, language etc. for two generations. It is typically the third generation of emigres that successfully assimilate into a new culture (if it will have them). This is well-documented from every exile in which Jews have been welcomed — witness the Eastern European immigration to the United States in the last decades of the 19th century through World War I. Shloimo begat Jonathan, whose son was William. William's son, sadly enough, was likely as not to be Chris. This would explain why the text traces Mordekhai's roots so far back — to explain how a notable Jew who will become our hero has such a name.

This explanation is bolstered by the interactions between Mordekhai and his co-workers in the king's court. Mordekhai was already a worker in the gates of the king no later than 479 BCE when Esther was taken into the palace. He had free access to the outer courtyard and was able to keep tabs on her welfare. His refusal to bow to Haman took place in 473 BCE, the 12th year of Ahashverosh's reign (Esther 3:7). In other words, he was working in the palace for at least six years, day in and day out. As indicated by the passage in 3:4, his co-workers were unaware of his identity as a Jew until he told them. For someone to be an observant Jew and keep it from their closest co-workers and neighbors is a seemingly insurmountable challenge.

Much the same is the apparent read of Esther/Hadasah. We are introduced to Mordekhai's cousin by both of her names. Whereas Hadasah is a clearly Hebrew name, Esther seems to fall into the same category as Mordekhai. In spite of the Midrashic associations with the Hebrew root *s*t*r*, the name is of clearly pagan provenance and is a form of Astarte, the goddess known throughout the near east. Like Mordekhai, her identity as a Jewess is kept discreet for at least six years — during her 12 months of preparation and the first five years of her rule. It is only when Haman's plot is about to be foiled that she steps forward and identifies herself as a member of that nation targeted for ethnocide. Unlike Mordekhai, in whose case we had to infer from his words to his fellow courtiers that his Jewishness was not visible, Esther's secret is a matter of black-on-white text: “Esther did not reveal her nation nor her family...” (Esther 2:10 and again in 2:20). How was Esther able to hide her dietary restrictions and everything else that goes along with observance from the many people who surrounded her on a constant basis?

If we read the Megillah as a story about two cousins who operate incognito to save the Jews, we are forced to ignore some texts, overreach on others and, perhaps most significantly, miss what may be the central point of the story. If, on the other hand, we read the text as it is, we are presented with two exiled Jews who have assimilated into the culture, have Persian names and are able to “pass” in the most powerful court in the world without anyone being aware of their identities. When they arrive at a crucial juncture — a *parashat derakhim* — in their lives, they make the difficult choice to step

forward, embrace their identities and risk life and limb on behalf of Am Yisrael. Mordekhai's powerful words sent to Esther:

כִּי אִם הַחֲרָשׁ תִּהְיֶינִי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רִחוּ
וְהִצְלָה יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאֶת וּבֵית
אָבִיו תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לֵעֵת כְּזֹאת הִנָּעַתְ
לְמַלְכוּת.

If you be silent at this time, salvation will arise for the Jews from another source and you and your father's house will be destroyed...

Esther 4:14

It is these persuasive words that generate the metamorphosis of Esther, the passive queen into the active Jewess. For the first time in the story, she takes the reins and initiates actions that ultimately lead to Haman's downfall and to salvation. Beyond the immediate redemption, her actions impel a wholesale change in the way that the Jews are perceived by their countrymen and, no doubt, by themselves. Jewish identity was no longer something to hide behind Persian clothes and Babylonian names. Judaism was embraceable and a source of pride for all — and therein lay the true *ge'ulah*.

This is not a story about perfect people; it is much more than that. We celebrate a crisis that pushed two Jews to shed their garments of exile and proudly don the crowns of royal Jews.

Endnotes

- 1 BT *Berakhot* 34b.
- 2 BT *Avodah Zarah* 17a; note that R. Yehuda haNassi wept when he made this exclamation; viz. BT *Yevamot* 64a.
- 3 Mishna, *Sheqalim* 5:1.

Purim: From the Grassroots Up

We generally tend to view the holidays of Hanukkah and Purim in a similar light, since both were created by rabbinic authority. These two *hagim* stand in contrast to biblical holidays such as Pesah and Sukkot, whose origins are rooted in the direct command of God. The truth is, placing Hanukkah and Purim in the same basket does not do justice to the reality that emerges from the sources. In a Hebrew essay written two decades ago about these two rabbinic holidays,¹ I explored the many distinctions that emerge through a closer look at the sugyot and halakhic discussions in Rishonim and Aharonim. The majority of this essay was later translated and published in English a number of years later.² The last section, however, dealing with a foundational distinction in the origin of the respective holidays, was not translated at the time. Below is an English version of part of that last section.

A.

According to Talmudic law, inhabitants of walled cities whose walls existed from the period of Joshua bin Nun celebrate Purim and the reading of the Megillah on the 15th day of Adar, as they did in antiquity in Shushan, while inhabitants of unwalled cities, i.e. most of the world, celebrate Purim on the 14th day of Adar. The Mishna, toward, the latter part of the second chapter of Tractate Megilla, states:



Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot

Chair of Torah She Baal Peh Department,
SAR High School, Riverdale, NY

Rabbi, Congregation Netivot Shalom, Teaneck, NJ

בן עיר שהלך לכרך ובן כרך שהלך לעיר אם
עתיד לחזור למקומו קורא כמקומו ואם לאו
קורא עמהן.

An inhabitant of a walled city — ben kerakh — who went to an unwalled city (before Purim), or an inhabitant of an unwalled city — ben ir — who went to a walled city (before Purim) — if he will be returning home, he reads in his home town; if not, he reads with them."

Megilla 19a



Rabba offers the following explanation ad loc:

אמר רבא לא שנו אלא שעתיד לחזור בלילי
ד' אבל אין עתיד לחזור בלילי ארבעה עשר
קורא עמהן.

This applies only when he is going to return on the night of the 14th. If he will not be returning on the night of the 14th, he reads with them.

The Rishonim are divided in their

understanding of Rabba's words. Rashi, and those who subscribe to his interpretation, maintain that the critical question, in Rabba's view, is where the person is *actually located* at daybreak of the 14th. Rashi writes:

לא שנו - דבן כרך שהלך לעיר ועתיד לחזור
למקומו קורא בחמשה עשר ולא בארבעה
עשר: אלא שעתיד לחזור בליל ארבעה עשר
- אם קודם עמוד השחר יצא מן העיר הוא
דקתני שאינו צריך לקרות עמהן בלילי י"ד
אע"פ שעודנו שם הואיל וביום לא יהיה שם
אין זה אפילו פרוז בן יומו.

"This applies" — An inhabitant of a walled city who goes to an unwalled city, and is going to return home, reads on the 15th and not on the 14th. But if he will be returning on the night of the 14th — if he leaves the city before daybreak — then he does not have to read with them on the night of the 14th, even though he is still there. Since he will no longer be there in the daytime, he is not even a 'paruz ben yomo' ['city-dweller for a day'].

It is clear from Rashi's language that the decisive issue is where this person will be on the day of the 14th (if we are speaking of an inhabitant of a walled city who visited an unwalled city). The same interpretation is offered by R. Zerahya Ha-Levi (*Ba'al ha-Maor* 6a in the pages of the Rif).

R. Yitzhak Alfasi (Rif) (ad loc.), in his halakhot, however, offers a different interpretation. The Rif seems to suggest that the critical halakhic consideration here is the person's intention: was he intending to return, or was he not? If he had intended to return, then even if for some reason he ended up staying, he is still regarded as a resident of his original walled city, and not as a *paruz ben yomo*. Only if his intention had originally been to stay in that city until daytime of the 14th do the laws of a *paruz ben yomo* apply to him.

At first glance, the Rif's interpretation seems quite strange: what difference does it make what this person's intention was? If he is physically located in the city, then seemingly he belongs to the category of *paruz ben yomo*. Indeed, the *Ba'al ha-Maor* questions the Rif's reasoning.

R. Moshe Ben Nahman (Ramban) defends the Rif in his *Milhamot Hashem* ad loc, writing:

אמר הכותב אפשר שלא נתבררו לו אבל דברים נכונים הם ... וכן מצינו בכל מקום שאין נותנין עליו חומרי מקום שהוא שם אלא כשאין דעתו לחזור ואפי' עמד שם כמה שלא לדעת לא עלה לו.

Perhaps [the words of the Rif] were not clear to [the Ba'al ha-Maor], but they are correct... Likewise we find that in no instance do we place upon a person the restrictions of the place where he is except where it is not his intention to return, and even if he stays in that place for several days without having previously intended to do so, he is not considered as staying there.

Ramban draws our attention to a discussion in *Massekhet Pesachim* (50-51). Let us review the main points. The Mishna there states:

מקום שנהגו לעשות מלאכה בערבי פסחים עד חצות עושין מקום שנהגו שלא לעשות אין עושין ההולך ממקום שעושין למקום שאין עושין או ממקום שאין עושין למקום שעושין נותנין עליו חומרי מקום שיצא משם וחומרי מקום שהלך לשם.

In a place where it is customary to perform melakha on erev Pesach up to midday, one may do so. In a place where it is customary not to, one may not. If a person goes from a place where people do melakha to a place where they do not, or from a place where they do not do melakha to a place where they do, we place upon him the restrictions of the place from whence he departed and the restrictions of the place to which he went.

In its discussion of the Mishna, the Gemara cites a case that once happened:

כי אתא רבה בר בר חנה אכל דאייתרא עול לגביה רב עזירא סבא ורבה בריה דרב הונא כיון דחזינהו כסייה מינייהו אתו ואמרו ליה לאביי אמר להו שווינכו ככותאי ורבה בר בר חנה לית ליה הא דתנן נותנין עליו חומרי המקום שיצא משם וחומרי המקום שהלך לשם ... רב אשי אמר אפילו תימא מא"י לבבל הני מילי היכא דאין דעתו לחזור ורבה בר בר חנה דעתו לחזור הוה.

When Rabba bar Bar Chana came, he ate of the stomach fat [Rashi: "The fat in the curve of the stomach, for the stomach is curved like a bow. The fat situated there was permitted to those living in the Land of Israel, but those living in Babylon treated it as forbidden."] Rav Avira the Elder and Rabba, son of R. Huna, visited him. As soon as he saw them, he hid [the fat] from them. When they told this to Abaye, he said to them, "He has treated you like Cuthites." But did Rabba bar Bar Chana not act in accordance with what we have learned: "We place upon him the restrictions of the place from

whence he departed and the restrictions of the place to which he went"? ... Rav Ashi said: "You may even say [that this applies also when a person goes] from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia, but only where he had no intention of returning, whereas Rabba bar Bar Chana intended to return."

Pesachim 51a

We see, then, that according to Rav Ashi's view concerning local customs, a person is subjected to the restrictions of the place to which he went only if he had not intended to return to his original place. Ramban therefore draws a comparison between the reading of the Megilla and the law of a *paruz ben yomo* and the laws of different local customs appearing in *Massekhet Pesachim*. Here too, he maintains, only when a villager intends to stay over in the city does the law of a *paruz ben yomo* apply to him, and this is the basis for the opinion of the Rif.

But here we must ask, what sort of comparison is this? Seemingly, there is no connection between the rules governing the adoption of **local custom**, on one hand, and a **law** that is *de-rabbanan*, such as the reading of the Megilla, on the other. On what basis is this comparison being drawn?

It would appear that the Ramban's explanation of the Rif sheds new light on the basis for the rabbinical enactment concerning Purim and the source of the obligation.

B.

In order to understand this, we must have another look at how the days of Purim were established, as described in the Megilla itself:

The first stage was the year of the battle itself:

וְשָׂאֵר הַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּמִדְיָנוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ נִקְהָלוּ
וְעָמְדוּ עַל נַפְשָׁם וְנוֹחַ מֵאֲיִבֵיהֶם וְהָרֹג בְּשִׁנְאֵיהֶם
חֲמִשָּׁה וּשְׁבַעִים אָלֶף וּבִבְזָה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת יָדָם.
בְּיוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ אֶדֶר וְנוֹחַ בְּאַרְבָּעָה
עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֹׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה
וְהַיְּהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוֹשָׁן נִקְהָלוּ בְּשִׁלְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ
וּבְאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְנוֹחַ בְּחִמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֹׂה
אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה.

And the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together and stood up for themselves, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes... on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

Esther 9:16-18

Following the tremendous victory, the Jews celebrated the miracle and made it a spontaneous day of feasting — in the unwalled towns on the 14th, and in the walled cities on the 15th.³

The second stage was in the years that followed, as recorded in the Megilla:

עַל כֵּן הַיְּהוּדִים הַפְּרָזִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת
עָשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ אֶדֶר שְׂמִיחָה
וּמְשֻׁתָּה וְיוֹם טוֹב וּמִשְׁלֹחַ מִנּוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ:
Therefore the Jews of the unwalled towns, who dwell in the unwalled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and holiday, and of sending choice portions to one another.

Esther 9:19

The plain meaning of the text suggests that it was a grassroots initiative on the part of the people themselves to celebrate the events of Purim in the years that followed. Indeed, this is Ramban's explicit understanding in his *Hiddushim* on *Massekhet Megilla* 2b.

The third stage was when Mordekhai

and Esther and their *beit din* set down the days of Purim for all future generations as a *takkanat Hazal* for all intents and purposes. This stage is recorded in the text with the words,

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֶרְדֳּכָי אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה ... לְהָיוֹת
עֲשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכַזְמָנָם
בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה ... וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמֶּלֶכָה בֵּת
אֲבִיהָ לְמֶרְדֳּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי אֶת כָּל תְּקוּף לְקִנְיָם אֶת
אֲגֻרַת הַפּוּרִים הַזֹּאת הַשְּׁנִיָּה:

And Mordekhai wrote these things...

That these days should be remembered and observed throughout every generation... Then Queen Esther, daughter of Avihayil, and Mordekhai the Jew, wrote with all emphasis to confirm this second letter of Purim.

Esther 9:20-29

We might therefore argue that even when Hazal set down the holiday for all future generations, they essentially left it in the same form as the original feast and celebration. **In other words, since this holiday began as a custom among Klal Yisrael, even when it was formalized as a rabbinical enactment, some elements of the rules pertaining to custom still applied.**

A review of the discussion in *Megilla* 19a, surrounding the law of a *paruz ben yomo*, shows that it is based on the verse, “Therefore the Jews...”:

אָמַר רַבָּא מִנָּא אֲמִינָא לֵה דְכֵתִיב עַל כֵּן
הַיְּהוּדִים הַפְּרוּזִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת
מְכַדִּי כְתִיב הַיְּהוּדִים הַפְּרוּזִים לְמָה לִּי לְמִיכְתֹּב
הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת הָאֵלֶּה דְפָרוּז בִּן
יּוֹמוֹ נִקְרָא פָּרוּז.

“Rabba said: From where do I derive this ruling [governing where a person who is not in his usual place must read the Megilla, depending on whether or not he intends to return in the night]? Because it is written, ‘Therefore the Jews of the villages who dwell in the unwalled

towns...’ See now: It is written, ‘the Jews of the unwalled towns.’ Why, then, must it also say, ‘who dwell in the unwalled towns’? This teaches us that one who is an inhabitant for one day [paruz ben yomo] is called an inhabitant of the unwalled town.”

It turns out, then, that the source of the law of the *paruz ben yomo* is from the verse that appears in the second stage — when all of Israel began to observe the days of Purim of their own accord. Therefore, we must understand that the law of *paruz ben yomo* is based on the perception of Purim as a day molded by custom, and that the laws pertaining to custom apply to it.

Endnotes

1 “Mah bein Hanukkah le-Purim,” Alon Shvut #051.

2 “Hanukkah and Purim: A Study of Their Differences” Alei Etzion #4.

3 We note the possibility that in that first year, the Jews observed Purim as a law having biblical origin (*de-oraita*) — as the *Sheiltot* maintains. *Sheilta* 26 reads: “For the House of Israel is obligated to give thanks and praise to God at the time when a miracle is performed for them, as it is written, ‘Praise the Lord, all nations; praise Him, all peoples!’ (Tehillim 117).”

The Netziv, in his *Ha’amek Davar*, explains: “At the time when the miracle happened, but not on that day every year [thereafter], for there is no biblical basis for that... Similarly, it is clear that the mitzvot of Chanuka at the time that it happened were *de-oraita*, while in our times they are *de-rabbanan*.”

Purim:

It's More than Meets the Eye

We all know the story of the Megillah. We know of Achashveirosh's party, Haman's plan, and Esther's bravery. We know that everything turns on its head, *vناهפוך-הו*, resulting in a miraculous salvation for *Am Yisrael*.

We know about celebrating our victory through a festive meal, sharing this celebration with others through *matanot la'evyonim* and *mishloach manot*, and recounting the miracle by reading the Megillah. However, one of the most important aspects of the holiday of Purim seems to live below the radar, out of the public eye.

Every holiday on our calendar has a mitzva that encapsulates the spiritual significance of the day. Rosh Hashana has the shofar, Sukkot the sukka, Chanukah the lights, Pesach the matzah, and Shavuot the Torah. What can we point to on Purim? Where does the essence of the holiday lie?

Many¹ seek to explain the essence of our celebration of Purim by comparing it to the other rabbinic celebration — Chanukah. Chanukah is all about the spiritual. The Greeks sought to eradicate our religion, so our celebration centers around imitating the kindling of lights in the Beit Hamikdash, a ritual response representing the spiritual. By contrast, Purim is all about the physical. Haman tried to physically annihilate our people, so our celebration centers around a feast



Rabbi Allan Houben

Upper School Judaic Studies Principal

Atlanta Jewish Academy

(eating, sharing, and providing for those less fortunate).

Others² reach the same conclusion that Purim is about the physical, through a comparison to Yom Kippur. Since *Yom HaKippurim* implies that Yom Kippur is a day “similar to” Purim (*ki-Purim*), the days must be similar yet at odds. Yom Kippur is an extreme day focused solely on our spiritual existence, even prohibiting all forms of physical pleasure. Purim similarly swings the balance the other way, focusing on eating and drinking wine — essentially rendering us as physical a being as possible.



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I posit that while both of these comparisons shed light on aspects of Purim, neither is successful at fully uncovering its essence. In order to truly understand Purim's significance,

we need to compare it to a very different holiday. The story of Purim really begins years before Haman was ever born.

The Gemara, in *Shabbat* 88a, tells us that when the Jewish People received the Torah, they were forced to accept it. It wasn't until the Purim story that the Jewish People accepted the Torah willingly:

ויתצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאוריינתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבה.

“And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: [the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Ya’akov said: From here is a substantial caveat to [the obligation to fulfill] the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted

it in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “They ordained and took upon them...” (Esther 9:27); they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

However, we understand the details of the story, the Gemara is clearly conveying that Purim represents the end of the process we began at Har Sinai. Somehow, our acceptance of the Torah on Shavuot was lacking and the acceptance at the time of Purim cemented our relationship with Torah. One suggestion is that our acceptance at Har Sinai lacked a true aspect of Free Will. After all, how could a nation of slaves witness miracles and a level of revelation that future prophets could not even match, and then turn around and say no to G-d? Were they really in a position to think, consider, and deny Hashem’s request? The *overt revelation* of Hashem’s presence and hand in the world left them in awe, and did not afford them the ability to choose of their own free will. It was an acceptance, but one borne out of *yirah*.

Purim, however, provided exactly the circumstances necessary for a full and free acceptance of the Torah *me’ahava*.³ Throughout the Megillah, Hashem’s name is not mentioned once. Hashem’s presence was not overt, it was hidden (*hester panim*). Am Yisrael could easily have explained away the events of Purim as simply a product of human bravery, but they didn’t. Toward the end of the Megillah, Esther 8:16, we say aloud:

ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר.
The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.

The reaction of *Am Yisrael* to the salvation from Haman’s decree was to identify Hashem as the source of their salvation. But that was not the end of their enlightenment. They realized that Hashem was not just responsible for this incredible turn of events; they came to understand that the hand of Hashem is behind so many aspects of their lives. The Gemara, *Megillah* 16b, provides a deeper understanding of this verse: *Ora, simcha, sasson, and yikar* refer not merely to light and

expressions of joy but to Torah and certain touchstone mitzvot:

“אורה זו תורה... שמחה זה יום טוב... ששון זו מילה... ויקר אלו תפילין...”
“Light”; this is referring to the Torah... “Gladness” [*simcha*]; this is referring to the Festivals... “Joy” [*sasson*]; this is referring to circumcision... “Honor”; this is referring to phylacteries.

The incredible, yet hidden, hand of Hashem guiding their salvation brought the Jews to realize that Hashem’s presence was influencing them on a regular basis, and that Hashem was always with them through Torah and mitzvot. The source of physical light in the world may be the sun, but their spiritual light, their sense of purpose and meaning, comes from the Torah. This epiphany, seeing the *yad Hashem*, allowed them to recommit and fully accept the Torah. Through seeing and acknowledging Hashem’s role in the world and the role of Torah and mitzvot, without the overt revelation to “complicate” their judgement, *Am Yisrael*’s relationship with Torah



If Purim is really about recommitting to Torah, then why does *limud haTorah* not play a prominent role in our celebration of Purim the way it does on Shavuot?

Purim and Yom Kippur

ענין פורים שהוא נגד יוה"כ ...
 ביוה"כ שאין בו אכילה ושתייה נגדו
 פורים ולכן בו הרבה משתה כי אין
 יו"ט לישראל כמו יוה"כ ... וכולן
 קבלת התורה יוה"כ כמ"ש בסוף
 תענית ופורים כמ"ש הדר קבלוה בימי
 ולכן הוא נגד יוה"כ.
 ליקוטי הגר"א קנדה.

The idea that Purim is opposite Yom Kippur [is that] on Yom Kippur there is no eating or drinking. Purim complements [Yom Kippur] in that there is a lot feasting, because there is no greater holiday for Israel than Yom Kippur ... Both of them represent an acceptance of Torah. Yom Kippur as we find at the end of Tractate Ta'anit and Purim is it states, "They reaccepted the Torah in the time [of Achashverosh]." Therefore, [Purim] is opposite Yom Kippur.

Likutei HaGra 154a

forever changed. Every week we invoke this verse in Havdalah as we leave Shabbat and we add "*kein tihyeh lanu*"; we pray that we too, even in the absence of Shabbat and the *neshama yiteira*,⁴ can see the spirituality, the *yad Hashem*, around us in the world, just as they did in that moment.

The obvious challenge is that if Purim is really about recommitting to Torah, then why does *limud haTorah* not play a prominent role in our celebration of Purim the way it does on Shavuot?

While the Rama, *Orach Chaim* 695:2, does encourage us to learn a little before beginning the *seudah*, Torah is clearly not central to our observance of Purim. Here too, we need to focus on the way *am Yisrael* came to their epiphany — not through overt revelation, as we experienced on Shavuot, but through noticing the subtle *yad Hashem*. If we take this idea, together with the aforementioned contrasts of Purim to Chanukah and Yom Kippur, we can see a broader picture of the holiday of Purim. Unlike Chanukah, when we specifically aim for a *public* show of faith in the form of lights outside or in our windows, and unlike Yom Kippur where we try to appear *outwardly* like angels, eschewing physical pleasures and engaging only in the spiritual, Purim is all about what happens on the *inside* — it is more than meets the eye.

The festive eating and drinking of Purim is not simply a way of celebrating a physical salvation from annihilation. Our goal is to take what *appears* to be purely physical and elevate it to be *spiritual*. Much like making a bracha before eating elevates a physical, even animalistic act to a spiritual one, so too our celebration of Purim is intended to elevate ourselves to the spiritual through the physical. Just like Hashem used natural means to bring about the miracle of Purim while He remained hidden, so too the spiritual aspect of our commemoration remains hidden to the untrained, unobservant eye. In addition, we are not simply concerned with our own feast, we also elevate our physical celebration by looking out for those less fortunate, through *matanot la'evyonim*, and by sharing with our friends and neighbors, through *mishloach manot*.

The essence of Purim lies not in an

object or a particular mitzva per se, but behind the scenes in the work of engaging with and elevating the physical to the spiritual. The *avoda* of Purim, then, stands in stark contrast to the *avoda* of Yom Kippur, when we seek to reach the spiritual by avoiding the physical. Perhaps this is why the inherent comparison in the name of the holiday (*Yom ha'ki-Purim*) implies not just a similarity but a hierarchy. While we look at Yom Kippur as the holiest day of the year, the *avoda* of Yom Kippur can last but one day, as in reality we are part physical and we cannot indefinitely suspend our reliance on the physical. Purim, however, is in some ways greater than Yom Kippur, for the Purim model of *avodat Hashem* is one that is not limited to a single day of the year. If all we take away from Purim is a table full of *chametz* to eat in the remaining weeks before Pesach, then we have missed the message and opportunity that Purim provides. To fully capitalize on our Purim, we too need to recommit to the Torah by looking for the *Yad Hashem* in our everyday lives, and seeking opportunities to live with a Purim mentality. Our challenge is to take the *avoda* of Purim with us the rest of the year, and to make engaging with and elevating the physical to the spiritual a daily occurrence.

Endnotes

- 1 See *Levush*, *Orach Chaim* no. 670.
- 2 *Shnei Luchot HaBrit*, Tetzaveh 27-28.
- 3 See *Olelot Ephraim* no. 144.
- 4 Literally "extra soul," I like to think of the *neshama yeteirah* as our "ESP," Extra Spiritual Perception, that allows us to feel closer to Hashem, to have a greater connection to the spiritual, on Shabbat.

Assemble the Jews: Assimilation is not an Option

Haman was a master orator. The Talmud (*Megilah* 13b) states:

אמר רבא ליכא דידע לישנא בישא כהמן.
Rava says that there was no one who knew how to speak as devilishly as Haman.

When we read the simple interpretation of these words, we see that Haman used his skills to speak against the Jewish people and manipulate King Achashveirosh to accomplish his plan of annihilating the Jews. However, the Gemara can be understood on a deeper level.

The commentators explain that the words Haman used to speak to Achashveirosh were also the prosecutorial words that he directed at the King of all Kings to be used against the Jewish nation.

Haman's intention was to claim both to the human king Achashveirosh why it was time to wipe out the Jewish nation, as well as to Hakadosh Baruch Hu why He too should allow the Jewish nation to be destroyed.

When Esther was informed of what was occurring, she orchestrated a plan to counteract both of Haman's claims — the one toward Achashveirosh and the one directed at Hashem. The *Manos Halevi* 4:16, points out the contrast between the words that Haman used and those that Esther used. Haman said “ישנו עם אחד מפזר ומפרד בין העמים” — there is a certain



Rabbi Moshe Hubner

Judaic Studies Faculty, HAFTR, Lawrence, NY

people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom” (Esther 3:8). When Esther began her counter-attack, she instructed Mordechai “לך כנוס את כל היהודים — Go, assemble all the Jews” (Esther 4:16).

The *Manos Halevi* explains that when Haman stated that the Jews are spread out, he was accusing them of having no unity among themselves. He was claiming to Hashem that the lack of unity is the reason they should now be destroyed. In response, Esther said, “Go assemble the people together,” meaning, create unity and that will be the defense necessary to stop Haman's evil decree.



With this understanding, several other commentators explain why the Megilah states numerous times that the Jews “*assembled*” together. “That the king had given to the Jews who are in every city, [the right] to *assemble* and to protect themselves”

(8:11), “Now the Jews who were in Shushan *assembled* on the fourteenth day of Adar as well” (9:15), “And the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces *assembled* and protected themselves” (9:16), “And the Jews who were in Shushan *assembled* on the thirteenth” (9:18).

Why does the Megilah emphasize the assembly so many times? It seems extraneous. Based on the above understanding, we could explain that this is the very reason the Jews were victorious. The fact that they *assembled* negated Haman's claim.

Perhaps there is an even deeper message we can learn from Esther's response to Haman. Every word that Haman said was countered with a direct word from Esther. Haman said, “ישנו עם אחד מפזר ומפרד בין העמים” — there is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom” (Esther 3:8). And Esther instructed Mordechai “לך כנוס את כל היהודים — Go, assemble all the Jews.” Haman did not name the “Jews”; he only said, “a certain people,” without identifying them directly. This can be interpreted to mean that he was

telling Hakadosh Baruch Hu that His nation had lost their identity; they were simply a nameless, stateless people with no real anchor. Esther, realizing how negative this was, said that they should “go assemble the *Jews*,” with the emphasis on the word *Jews*. She was saying that in order to be victorious, the Jews had to begin identifying themselves as a Jewish nation. Assimilating is not an option. That is exactly how Haman is going to try to destroy us. Indeed, when we look at the verses that emphasize assembly, the word *Jew* also appears. Thus, one of the goals of unifying was to unify as Jews and restore Jewish identity.

“That the king had given to the *Jews* who are in every city, [the right] to assemble and to protect themselves” (8:11), “Now the *Jews* who were in Shushan assembled on the fourteenth day of Adar as well” (9:15), “And the rest of the *Jews* who were in the king’s provinces assembled and protected themselves” (9:16), “And the *Jews* who were in Shushan assembled on the thirteenth” (9:18). (See also 8:13, 8:16, 8:17, Chapter 9:1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 12, 13 where the word “*Jews*” seems extra.)

Esther, during much of the story, could not publicly identify as a Jew. Who did Esther have with her in her fight against Haman? Mordechai. How are we introduced to Mordechai?

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשָׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֹרְדֳּכָי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן שִׁמְעִי בֶּן קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי.

There was a Judite man in Shushan the capital, whose name was Mordechai, the son of Yair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.

Esther 2:5

The Gemara, *Megilah* 13a, wonders how one person can be a Judite (meaning from the tribe of Yehudah) and a Benjamite (from the tribe of Binyamin)? The answer is that really, he was from the tribe of Binyamin. However, he was being introduced as a “Jewish man” — meaning someone fiercely proud of his Jewish identity (see *Yeshua Gedolah* by Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz). Zeresh, the wife of Haman, told her husband, “If Mordechai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish birthright, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him” (6:13).

We live in a world that is conducive to assimilation. It is much easier to blend in than to stand out. Esther realized that one of the greatest ways



It is much easier to blend in than to stand out. One of the greatest ways of preventing assimilation is through unity or “assembly.”

of preventing assimilation is through unity or “assembly.” When people are alone, the temptation toward assimilation is much stronger. When we have a sense of camaraderie with other Jews, we take pride in being Jewish and the desire to assimilate is diminished. Purim is a day where we stress that camaraderie through the mitzvah of *mishloach manos* (see *Manos HaLevi* 9:19), and this ultimately leads to greater Jewish identity.

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Disconnection and Connection in Binyamin and Esther

While on his deathbed, Yaakov bestows a bracha upon Binyamin that establishes a unique intergenerational connection between Binyamin and Esther:

בְּנִימִין יֶאֱבֵד יִטְרֹף בְּבֹקֶר יֹאכֹל עַד וְלָעֶרֶב יַחְלֹק שְׁלָל.

Binyamin is a wolf who will snatch its prey in the morning and in the evening divide its loot.

Bereishit 49:27

This blessing is actualized with the coronation of King Saul in the “morning” of the First Commonwealth, and in the victory of Esther and Mordechai at the “twilight” of this era (Rashi, Bereishit 49:27). The strikingly similar characteristics of Binyamin and Esther have been explicated and supported through examining the matriarchal influence of Rachel (her *tzniut* and silence) on both of them (*Esther Rabba* 6:12). However, perhaps it is actually the patriarchal effects of Yaakov that suffuse this lineage and provide an even stronger and more psychologically intriguing connection between Binyamin and Esther.

Binyamin is the quintessential loner, a *levado*. He is born alone in this world, with the knowledge that his birth caused his mother’s death, having neither a mother nor father to raise him; his father is emotionally inconsolable after the loss of his favorite son Yoseph (Bereishit 37:35).



Mrs. Ora Lee Kanner

Principal, Katz Yeshiva High School of South Florida
Boca Raton, FL

Binyamin lives his days aware of the lies and deceptions of his brothers,¹ never being accepted as one of them, while watching his father’s inexorable pain caused by those brothers. He is alone, living a solitary existence from the day of his birth, forced to face the reality of living life on his own.



This *levado* existence defines Binyamin, and so he is described by Yehuda as *vayivater hu levado*, “and he remained alone” (Bereishit 44:20). Despite being the subject of discussion, debate and accusations throughout the end of Sefer Bereishit, not one word of Binyamin’s is uttered or recorded. In Yehuda’s impassioned appeal to Yoseph to save Binyamin’s life, never does Yehuda declare his or his brothers’ love

for Binyamin, only the heartbreak Binyamin’s death would cause their father (Bereishit 44:31).

Binyamin’s state of *levado* is his destiny. He alone is the heir to the *levado* state of his father, as he and Yaakov are the only figures in Chumash described as *vayivater hu levado*. He is the only son born to Yaakov after his character-altering encounter with *levado* at *Nachal Yabok*. Yaakov’s experience of *levado* is an existential confrontation; a face-to-face encounter with himself as he is forced into a state of solitude described as *vayivater hu levado* (Bereishit 32:25). Finally able to face himself, Yaakov can at long last connect to G-d face to face, leading him to name the city P’niel, — *panim el panim* — a face-to-face connection with G-d (E-l) (Bereishit 32:31). This meditative, painfully honest, reflective state allows Yaakov to transform from his prior state of interacting from behind as Yaakov, to frontally, honestly and openly interacting as Yisrael, thereby acquiring his legacy of an *ish ha’emet*, man of truth.

Likewise, Binyamin, observing from the sidelines, recognizes the truth

of the family of Yisrael, unhindered by the need for justifications, rationalizations or defenses. The complex profile of a *levado* is unfettered by the need to conform and yield to social pressure, thus allowing for acute self-awareness and heightened spiritual growth.² Thus perhaps G-d chooses specifically the territory of Binyamin in which to dwell (Rashi, Devarim 33:12).

However, this particular persona faces the greatest risk of alienation and ostracism. The antidote for the alienation, isolation and even excommunication that jeopardizes the state of *levado*, is the blessing of *chen*. It follows that only after Yaakov experiences his struggle of *levado* does he express to Essav his appreciation of the gift of *chen* (of charisma) bestowed upon each of his 11 children (*hayeladim asher chanan Elokim et avdecha* — the children that G-d bestowed on your servant, Bereishit 33:5). It is this amorphous trait of *chen* (a free gift — *chinam*), an unearned natural quality, that attracts, connects and bonds people to each other. It is Yoseph's recognition of the *levado* state of Binyamin, its corresponding peril of isolation, as well as his conspicuous lack of *chen* that leads Yoseph to offer the *bracha* of *Elokim yachnecha b'ni*, "G-d shall be gracious to you, my son" (Bereishit 43:29), to his beloved Binyamin. The descendants of Binyamin continue through history sorely lacking the connectivity, likability and relatability that is necessary to be enduring leaders that unites their people. The concomitant effects of spiritual heights and social alienation resulting from a life of *levado* define the history of Shevet Binyamin.

The Midrash, *Mechilta Beshalach* 5,

describes the attempt of the tribe of Binyamin to be the first to cross Yam Suf as ending in failure, with the other tribes uniting in stoning them, and refusing the ostracized tribe of Binyamin the honor of being the first to cross the sea.

In the horrific tale of the *Pilegish Begiva* (uncannily similar to the word *gavia*) (Shoftim, chapters 19-21), Binyamin stands alone in defying his brothers, refusing to hand over the perpetrators of the crime of murdering the concubine. It is only when Binyamin is nearly decimated that the brothers recant and resolve to save the tribe of Binyamin from extinction. The tribe of Binyamin is cast into the nadir of *levado*, having to honestly confront themselves and own up to their responsibility in the events

It is precisely the realization on the part of Binyamin of their near desolation, their stark confrontation with the state of *levado*, that gives rise to the first king of Israel, who himself is a loner, described as different and "head and shoulders beyond all others."

that led to their excommunication.

It is no wonder that King Shaul, the first King of Israel, emerges from the ashes of the *Pilegish begiva*, from that state of *levado*. It is precisely the realization on the part of Binyamin

ותלבש אסתר מלכות - [בגדי מלכות מבעי ליה] אלא שלבשה מלכות בית אביה. [מ"ר פ' וירא פרשה נ"ו]: המפרשים נדחקו בבאור דרשה זו. ולי נראה פשוט דלבשתה מלכות בית אביה, שהוא שאול ... וכמו לשאול נמסר דבר אבדן עמלק כך לבשתה עתה אסתר רוח זה להאביד את המן העמלקי, וכמבואר שמטרת בואה עתה למלך לבקש את המן אל המשתה להוציא כל הענין לפועל כאשר באמת כן היה

תורה תמימה אסתר ה:א

"The verse (5:1) states 'And Esther wore royalty.' [It should have said, 'Esther wore royal clothing,'] Rather she wore the royalty of her father's house." (Midrash Rabbah, Vayera no. 56). The commentators struggled to understand this interpretation. It seems obvious to me [to explain] that she wore the royalty of her father's house, of Shaul. And just as Shaul was given the power to destroy Amalek, so too, Esther was cloaked with this mission to destroy Haman the Amalekite, as is clear, that the whole purpose of her coming now to the king was to request that Haman come to the feast and bring about everything that took place subsequently.

Torah Temimah, Esther 5:1

of their near desolation, their stark confrontation with the state of *levado*, that gives rise to the first king of Israel,

who himself is a loner, described as different and “head and shoulders beyond all others” (Shmuel I 9:2).

The direct heir to the *levado* character of Yaakov and Binyamin, the one that most mirrors the background and personality of Binyamin, is Esther. Like Binyamin, she too, has no parents; her mother too died while giving birth to her (*Esther Rabba* 6:5). She too is raised by a father figure who refuses to be consoled (Yaakov after the death of Rachel and Mordechai after the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash). She too is left alone, waited upon, worried about, deliberated upon, while remaining silent throughout, asking for nothing and demanding nothing.

In being cast into this state of absolute and painful solitude, forced by Mordechai to face the reality of her life, the truth of her ancestral mistakes³ and her responsibility to her destiny, Esther finds her strength, finds her voice and rises up to the challenge of fighting for herself and her people.

Yoseph’s blessing of *chen* to Binyamin was not fully realized until the birth of his descendent Esther. It is only in

her that the blessing of *chen* is realized, underscored by its repetition three times in the Megilla.⁴

The story of Purim is a historic moment of redemption for the tribe of Binyamin as they are transformed from a tribe of *levado* to a tribe filled with *chen*, and are thus able to connect and inspire the entirety of the Jewish people. It is also a national redemption for the Jewish People, as they move from a state of *am mefuzar umeforad* (a nation that is scattered and disparate (Esther 3:8) to a united nation prepared to rally together to fight their enemies. It is the ability to unite as one people, resulting from an abundance of *chen*, that finally allows the Jewish People to defeat Amalek. This *chen* had been allotted to the tribe of Binyamin (*Baba Batra* 123a), but until now, Binyamin was not successful in accessing it. [Yaakov had recognized the enormous power of *chen* in his children while confronting Esav, foreshadowing the power of the *chen* of Esther in defeating Amalek.]

This is the concretization of the bracha given generations earlier to Binyamin by Yaakov when he said, “Binyamin is a wolf who will snatch its prey in the morning and in the

evening divide its loot.” Indeed, in the dawn of Binyamin’s history, he will kill his prey and bring it back to his secluded den, devouring it as a wolf, alone.⁵ Such was the description of Binyamin throughout his early history as seen in the incident of the *Pilegish begiva*, and Shaul. But in its twilight, with Esther and Mordechai, he will have acquired the wherewithal to divide his winnings and share them with klal Yisrael. Such was the bracha afforded to Shevet Binyamin, having incorporated the spiritual gifts of a life lived *levado* with the social connections gained from the G-d-given gift of *chen*.

Perhaps the emphasis on interpersonal mitzvot on Purim, such as the obligations of *mishloach manot* and *matanot la’evyonim*, is a means of celebrating the newly realized connectivity of the descendants of Binyamin to their brothers — finally having attained the status of *ratzui l’rov echav*, beloved to most of his brothers (Esther 10:3). But even more striking, perhaps, is the obligation to commemorate this day with the eating of a *seuda* with family and friends. Certainly this seems to be a reenactment and celebration of the fulfillment of the bracha of Binyamin: “in the evening, divide its loot.”

Endnotes

1 Sota 36b.

2 Long, Christopher and Averill, James R. “Solitude: An exploration of the Benefits of Being Alone,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 33:1 (2003).

3 Malbim, Esther 2:2, *Manot Halevi*. 4:14, *Torah Temima* 5:1.

4 Esther 2:15, 2:17, 5:2.

5 *Bechor Shor*, Genesis 49:27.



Those Who Bowed Down Were No Better Off

The text of the Megillah shares important details with us about the specific historical and geographical settings of the Purim story. In the opening lines of the Megillah we are introduced to Achashverosh, the governing ruler over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia, his capital city — Shushan — and the goings on during the first months of Achashverosh's newly established kingdom. Yet as we read on, it becomes clear that some of the thematic overtones of the Purim story were not meant to be considered as unique to the Biblical events of Mordechai and Esther, but rather as being part of a tale that has unfolded time and again during many different moments and milieus throughout Jewish history.

In particular, Megillat Esther is the story of a geographically spread out minority Jewish community dwelling among an overwhelmingly non-Jewish populace. The Jew of history would recognize the unceasing challenge of having to simultaneously maintain a Jewish identity and commitment to Jewish tradition, while at the same time attempting to be accepted by the non-Jewish society around him. This struggle was best illustrated during the Jewish people's experience in Egypt in the years leading up to their enslavement at the hands of Pharaoh. "The children of Israel were fruitful and swarmed and increased and



Rabbi Effie Kleinberg

Director of Educational Technology and Religious Growth, Bnei Akiva Schools, Toronto, ON

became very very strong, and the land became filled with them."¹ The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in his *HaAmek Davar*, placed the final words of the verse, and the land became filled with them, in their broader historical context:



לא ארץ גושן לבד שהיתה מיוחדת לישראל, אלא אפילו כל ארץ מצרים מלאה את ישראל. והיה כל מקום פנוי שמצאו ישראל לקנות ולדור – נתיישבו שמה... ובא הכתוב להקדים בזה סיבת שנאת מצרים, משום שבקשו לצאת ממצרים יעקב אבינו שיישבו דווקא בארץ גושן כדי שיהיו בדד ונבדל ממצרים, אבל הם לא רצו כן... אשר היא הסיבה שבכל דור עומדים עלינו לכלותנו בשביל שאין אנו רוצים להיות נבדלים מן האומות.

Not only the land of Goshen that was set aside for Israel, but even the entire land of Egypt was filled with Israelites. And it was in every open place that an Israelite found to purchase and dwell in — they lived there... and this verse is coming to introduce the reason for the Egyptian's hatred, because they attempted to divest from Ya'akov Avinu's desire for them to dwell specifically in the land of Goshen to enable them to be isolated and separate, but they [the Israelites] didn't want to do this... this is the reason that in every generation they [our enemies] rise up against us to destroy us, because we do not want to be separate from the nations.

This theme continued in the early stages of the Purim narrative. Achashverosh threw a kickoff party for his new kingdom and he invited all of the citizens of Shushan. Included in the party were members of the Jewish community. Our rabbis say that the Jewish community's willing and active participation in this party is partially what led to the Divinely orchestrated plan to eradicate the Jews.² Herein lies another moment where a Jewish community's decision to attempt to blend into the surrounding culture produced a negative outcome.

The pinnacle of this theme's evolution unfolded during the events following Achashverosh's appointment of Haman as his prime minister. The Megillah records that Achashverosh had commanded his subjects to kneel and bow before Haman, and so they did, with the exception of Mordechai, "for he had told them that he was a Jew."³ By bowing to Haman, the party-going Jews of Shushan had now made another concession in order to blend in. Only Mordechai defied Haman, because for him, the actions of that moment would be a blueprint for the role of the Jewish people for generations to come.

The actions of Mordechai incensed Haman, but for Haman, "it seemed contemptible to him to lay hands on Mordechai alone, for they had told him Mordechai's nationality, and Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout Achashverosh's entire kingdom, Mordechai's people."⁴ Haman's logic is difficult to comprehend. Mordechai was the only individual who refused to bow, yet Haman was determined to eliminate the entire Jewish people, despite the fact that they had obeyed and bowed to him! In his presentation to Achashverosh, Haman used Mordechai's actions as a pretext for obtaining permission to destroy the Jewish people: "There is a certain people scattered and separate among the peoples throughout all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws differ from [those of] every

people, and they do not keep the king's laws; it is [therefore] of no use for the king to let them be."⁵

Mordechai understood that it made no difference whether or not one bowed down to Haman; it was the very existence of the Jewish people and what they stood for which Haman could not handle. Haman's hatred and desire to eliminate the Jewish people was not a result of their behavior, because many Jews bowed to Haman. Haman's hatred was directed at *am Mordechai* — Mordechai's people. Mordechai was the embodiment of the world's moral consciousness, a living, breathing symbol of a God-given value system that entered the world many centuries before with the giving of the Torah. It was this which Haman saw at the core of all Jews, regardless of whether they bowed or not.⁶

Throughout subsequent generations, Jews attempted to "fit in" to the various cultures surrounding them by taking on non-Jewish names, casting aside Torah observance, relocating away from the Jewish enclaves and integrating among the non-Jewish populace:

We have seen in our own times how true this is. The most sophisticated, assimilated German Jew, who was more German than the Germans, who had Goethe and Schiller flowing from his lips, who was married a blond blue-eyed Aryan woman, who knew every symphony of Mozart and Wagner, who was an avid student of Nietzsche and

*Schopenhauer—this Jew was sent to the Treblinka and Dachau gas chambers with the same glee as the OustJude—the ultra-religious Chassidic Jew of the East, immersed day and night in the study of our sacred texts and complete Jewish observance.*⁷

As the Netziv expressed, the more the Jewish people have tried to fit in, the more they have stuck out. Throughout history, Jews around the globe have deluded themselves into thinking that if they managed to blend in, the haters and enemies would treat them as equals. In era after era, the opposite effect occurred, and the hatred only grew. The Purim story reminds us that we are all part of *am Mordechai*, the people who have no reason, and for that matter, no possibility to hide, but rather the people who are called on to embrace and be proud of our unique value system given to us by God at Sinai, and through this be a blessing and source of inspiration for all of humanity!

Endnotes

- 1 Shemot 1:7.
- 2 See Talmud Bavli, *Megilla* 12a.
- 3 Esther 3:4.
- 4 Ibid 3:6.
- 5 Ibid 3:8.
- 6 Based on an address by the Lubavitcher Rebbe printed in *Sichos Kodesh* 5729 vol. 1 pp. 401-414.
- 7 Rabbi YY Jacobson, "Why the Glee in Murdering a Jewish Child?" available at: <https://www.theyeshiva.net/jewish/928>.



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Uncovering Our Hidden Greatness

Over the years, certain students stand out for reasons that are hard to forget. One such student is a girl named Becky who I taught many years ago in a Hebrew school program in New York. In preparation for Purim, we had spent several weeks learning the story of Megillat Esther, as well as the mitzvot of *mishloach manot* and *matanot la'evyonim*. After we finished learning the Megilla, Becky said to me, "this story would be so cool ... if it were real." This, of course, created a whole discussion about whether the stories in Tanach are real or, as she assumed, Jewish fairy tales. But looking back on that comment many years later, I realize a deeper meaning to Becky's statement that she may not have even intended.

If you ask most Jewish kids, they will tell you that Purim (costumes and hamentashen) is one of their favorite chagim. In a religion that often calls on us to be serious and disciplined, Purim seems to tell us to escape reality, to dress up as someone else, and even (for the adults) to drink *ad delo yadah*, until we can no longer distinguish between Arur Haman and Baruch Mordechai (the limits and parameters of this practice are beyond the scope of this *dvar Torah*). Why are we working so hard to escape reality on Purim? Is Purim just the Jewish Halloween, a day to dress up and act silly? There must be something deeper going on.



Rabbi Aaron Levitt

Judaic Studies Principal

Robert M. Beren Academy, Houston, TX

There are many different themes of Purim. We can focus on finding Hashem in our lives even when He seems to remain behind the scenes. We can talk about standing up to those who would discriminate against us because we are Jewish.



ROBERT M. BEREN
ACADEMY

We can emphasize the idea of Jewish unity through *mishloach manot* and *matanot la'evyonim*. These are all very important aspects of the chag. But I believe there is an additional aspect of Purim that should not be overlooked. *Purim tells us that each of us has greatness within us and if we look beneath the surface, we will find incredible untapped potential.*

Of course, this can be seen in the

story of the Megilla itself, in which Mordechai had to persuade Esther of the power she yielded:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֶרְדֳּכָי לְהִשִּׁיב אֶל אֶסְתֵּר אֶל תְּדַמִּי
בְּנַפְשִׁי לְהַמְלִיט בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל הַיְּהוּדִים. כִּי
אִם הַחֲרָשׁ תִּחְרָשִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצְלָה
יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאַתָּה וּבֵית
אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לָעַת כְּזֹאת הִנָּעַת
לְמַלְכוּת.

Mordecai 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 your royal position for just such a crisis."

Esther 4:13-14

The book is called Megillat Esther (not Megillat Mordechai) because it was Esther who risked her life and saved the Jewish People. It was Esther who discovered her potential and rose to the occasion. And that is the meaning of the words Megillat Esther. They do not just mean the Scroll of Esther. They can also be translated as the revealing (*megaleh*) of that which is hidden (*hester*).

You see, *hester* (hiddenness) is a major theme of Purim. We often focus on the *hester panim* of Hashem, the fact that Hashem runs the world in a way that it is not obvious that He is doing so in order to give us free will. That is why there are no examples of a *neis nigleh* (a revealed miracle) in the Megilla, and why Hashem's name does not appear at all in the sefer. It is why the chag is called Purim, after the lottery used by Haman to determine the date to kill us. Amalek represents *mikreh* (chance) whereas we believe that everything has a purpose and that there is no such thing as coincidence in this world.

But there is another kind of *hester* as well, and that is the hidden untapped potential each of us has within us as a gift from Hashem. And Purim comes to remind us to reveal that potential, to uncover that greatness.

Perhaps that is why the Megilla must be read as a letter that is slowly

unfolded, rather than as a scroll rolled like a sefer Torah: to remind us that it is our sacred duty to uncover our potential. Perhaps that is why we have the minhag to eat hamentashen on Purim, which are cookies whose inner sweetness is covered up. Perhaps that is why we wear costumes on Purim, to remind us that we need to find our true selves underneath, that maybe we are really wearing costumes all year long and have not yet uncovered who we are really meant to be. And perhaps that even explains why there is a custom to drink wine on Purim "*ad delo yadah*," not to escape reality but to uncover it, as the Gemara explains "*nichnas yayin yatzah sod* — when the wine enters the inner truths come out."

By the way, this is one of the three great Gematria's of Purim:

Yayin = Sod = 70

Baruch Mordechai = Arur Haman = 502

Amalek = Safek (doubt) = 240 [This is also the gematria of יינקיס, for those New York Yankees fans out there.]

So yes, Purim is an unusual day. But not just because we dress up and deliver gift baskets. It is an unusual day because it is a day when we reflect on who we really are inside, rather than on what others expect us to be. When we think about the untapped potential inside of us and how we can use those gifts to serve Hashem. When we reveal to ourselves and to the world the sweetness that lies within.

So Becky, wherever you are out there, I hope you know by now that Purim is not about escaping reality but about finding it. That the truth is that Purim is all about finding our inner selves. That if celebrated correctly, it is the most "real" holiday of them all. And, like Esther before you, I hope that you have discovered your own inner potential.

Perhaps that is why the Megilla must be read as a letter that is slowly unfolded, rather than as a scroll rolled like a sefer Torah: to remind us that it is our sacred duty to uncover our potential.



Turning the Ordinary into the Extraordinary

The Status of Yom Purim in Rambam's Mishneh Torah

The relationship between the individual mitzvot of Purim and the general quality of the day constitutes one of the overarching questions regarding the nature of Purim and our celebration of it. To what degree are the mitzvot of the day isolated actions performed against an otherwise profane backdrop; alternatively, might the mitzvot of Purim stem from the day's character as a *yom mishteh vi'simcha*, a day of feasting and rejoicing, or, maybe even, a *yom tov*? This essay will analyze Rambam's development of this central issue by investigating his novel presentation of Purim's various facets. In some cases, identifying a prior source for Rambam's positions and formulations proves elusive, while in other cases, Rambam overtly modifies or seemingly contradicts his Talmudic foundation. A common trend, though, unifies all of these instances and depicts Rambam's distinctive approach toward our central question.

I. Issur Melakha

Rambam presents the potential existence of an *issur melakha* — prohibited labor — on Purim in a nuanced fashion: *melakha* is permitted, yet unqualifiedly inappropriate and ultimately unproductive:



Rabbi David Nachbar

Faculty, Torah Academy of Bergen County, Teaneck, NJ

Faculty, Graduate Program In Advanced Talmudic Studies, Yeshiva University

ומותר בעשיית מלאכה ואע"פ כן אין ראוי לעשות בו מלאכה. אמרו חכמים כל העושה מלאכה ביום פורים אינו רואה סימן ברכה לעולם.

Labor is permissible [on Purim] but nevertheless, it is not proper to perform labor. Our rabbis stated: anyone who performs labor on Purim doesn't see success from it ever.

Hilkhot Megillah 2:14



Rambam's position seems problematic when assessed against the Talmud's background discussion. The Talmud (*Megillah* 5b) struggles with the question of whether *melakha* ought to be prohibited on Purim. Historical precedent offers contradictory signals,

since R. Yehudah ha'Nassi himself planted trees on Purim; on the other hand, Rav cursed an individual whom he observed planting flax, permanently terminating the flax's growth. Adding to the complexity of the matter, the Talmud cites Rav Yosef's halakhic derivation of an *issur melakha* from the phrase "*yom tov*" in the verse's description of Purim's original celebration — "*simcha, u'mishteh, vi'yom tov umishloach manot...*" — rejoicing, feasting, holiday, and gift giving (Esther 9:18).

Three resolutions seek to resolve the tension between sources. According to the first suggestion, an *issur melakha* applies on the observed day of Purim, either the 14th for city-dwellers or the 15th for residents of walled cities; however, it doesn't apply on the alternate day. R. Yehudah ha'Nassi celebrated Shushan Purim and was, therefore, permitted to plant on the 14th of Adar. Alternatively, *melakha* is permitted, in principle, on both days of Purim since the later verse, which describes the establishment of the holiday (Esther 9:22) replaces

the term “yom tov,” with *matanot li’evyonim*, indicating that the “yom tov” quality failed to gain traction and acceptance within the nation; nonetheless, certain communities adopted an *issur melakha* as their communal norm, and Rav’s curse reflected local communal practice. R. Yehudah ha’Nassi planted trees on Purim due to his community’s preservation of the baseline standard. Finally, it is possible that R. Yehudah ha’Nassi’s community adopted the more ambitious standard of *issur melakha*, but R. Yehudah ha’Nassi’s planting for the construction of a wedding canopy for *simchat chatan vi’kallah* was consistent in spirit with *simchat Purim*.

Rambam’s qualified position that *melakha* is permitted, but universally inappropriate and unproductive, seems to contradict all three approaches in the Gemara. According to the first approach, *melakha* is absolutely prohibited, while according to the second and third approaches it is purely the function of communal practice. Rambam’s view that *melakha* is permitted, but deemed unconditionally inappropriate, seems baseless. Furthermore, the inner logic of Rambam’s view is difficult irrespective of his source. If the “yom tov” quality of Purim was rejected, the roots of *melakha*’s inappropriate character are obscured.

II. Seudah

Rambam introduces several novel features in his presentation of the Purim meal (*seudat Purim*):

כיצד חובת סעודה זו שיאכל בשר ויתקן
סעודה נאה כפי אשר תמצא ידו. ושותה יין עד
שישתכר וירדם בשכרותו.
What are the obligations of this meal?

One should eat meat and prepare a nice meal in accordance with one’s financial means. And one should drink wine until one becomes drunk and sleeps from drunkenness.

Rambam incorporates the consumption of meat within his definition of the mitzvah, but simultaneously omits any requirement to eat bread. Moreover, Rambam surprisingly includes drinking wine within the *seudah*’s framework. Rambam’s basis for requiring wine consumption is, undoubtedly, Rava’s statement (*Megillah* 7b) that one should drink wine until one doesn’t know the difference between the blessing of Mordechai and the curse of Haman — which Rambam treated as a halakhic norm. The inclusion of this norm as part of the *seudah*’s framework, though, is not apparent in Rava’s words. What is additionally striking about Rambam’s core definition of the *seudah*, is the subjective standard that he sets for its fulfillment. Typically, obligations to eat and drink have quantifiable measures that determine whether one has properly fulfilled the mitzvah. With respect to *seudat Purim*, though, Rambam introduces an ascending scale depending on the individual. A “nice meal” should be prepared “in accordance with one’s financial means.” Likewise, the quantity of wine necessary to cause one to fall asleep in a drunken stupor would seemingly vary between people. Rambam’s innovative features of *seudat Purim* — the inclusion of meat and wine, the omission of bread, and a subjective, ascending-scale definition for fulfilling the mitzvah — are without an immediately apparent source.

III. Mishloach Manot and Matanot li’Evyonim

The Talmud (*Megillah* 7a) establishes objective measures for the necessary number of gifts and recipients for the fulfillment of *mishloach manot* and *matanot li’evyonim*: Two portions must be delivered to one individual for *mishloach manot*, and two gifts must be given to two poor individuals for *matanot li’evyonim*. Rambam’s presentation of both halakhot modifies the Talmud’s definition. He writes:

וכן חייב אדם לשלוח שתי מנות ... וכל
המרבה לשלוח לריעים משובח ... וחייב לחלק
לעניים ביום הפורים. אין פחות משני עניים
נותן לכל אחד מתנה אחת.

One is obligated to send two items ... if one sends more [than the requirement] to friends, it is praiseworthy ... One is obligated to give charity to the poor on Purim, one must give a gift to not less than two poor individuals.

Hilkhot Megillah 2:15-16

In both instances, Rambam converts the Talmud’s quantifiable measures into minimum standards. With respect to *mishloach manot*, the praiseworthiness of the gesture is commensurate with the number of gifts and people one delivers to. The escalating quality of the mitzvah is even more pronounced with respect to *matanot li’evyonim*, where Rambam includes an aspirational quality in his initial basic definition — “not less than two poor individuals.”

The expansive scope of *matanot li’evyonim*’s distribution relates to which individuals qualify as deserving recipients, in addition to the number of individuals who are given to. Rambam adopts an exceedingly accommodating standard. The Talmud (*Bava Metzia* 78b)

states “*ein midakdekim bi’davar*,” we don’t adopt a calculated approach with respect to money collected for *matanot li’evyonim*. Rambam (*Hil. Megillah* 2:16), based on the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Megillah* 1:4), interprets that funds should be distributed to anyone who stretches out their hand, without inquiring further about the individual’s financial standing and deservedness. Although Rambam’s approach seems well-rooted in earlier sources, this attitude seems risky or even reckless. If funds were collected for distribution to *evyonim*, how can *gabbaim* appropriate money to those who may not qualify?

IV. Purim’s Aspirational Standards

The common strand unifying each of Rambam’s novel positions and formulations is the aspirational quality of Purim. In each instance, there exists a basic definition that sets a minimum standard, but one that can be subjectively and ambitiously built upon. Rambam’s opening formulation of Purim’s many facets helps unearth the underlying motive behind Purim’s aspirational standards:

מצות יום י"ד לבני כפרים ועירות ויום ט'
לבני כרכים להיותן יום שמחה ומשתה
ומשלוח מנות לריעים ומתנות לאביונים.

The mitzvah on the fourteenth for the city-dwellers and on the fifteenth for residents of walled-cities is for it to be a day of joy and celebration and gift-giving to friends and to the poor.

Hilkhos Megillah 2:14

Rambam’s remarkable opening definition sets the tone for the ensuing halakhot. There is no mitzvah to eat a *seudah* nor is there a mitzvah to send *mishloach manot* or *matanot li’evyonim*, per se; rather, the mitzvah

is to engage in these activities in order to transform an ordinary, routine, profane day into “a day of joy and celebration and gift-giving to friends and to the poor.” The mitzvah, in his definition, is “for it to be a day of...” The mitzvah activities that we perform do not exist against a profane backdrop nor do they stem from a day whose already established character is one of a *yom mishteh vi’simcha* or a *yom tov*. The relationship is reversed such that engagement in these mitzvah activities transform the day’s character and create the extraordinary out of the ordinary.

The mitzvah is to engage
in the activities of
Purim in order to
transform an ordinary,
routine, profane day
into “a day of joy and
celebration and
gift-giving to friends
and to the poor.”

With this orientation, Rambam’s innovations share a common internal logic. The day is inherently profane and routine, and, hence, *melakha* is permitted; however, it is inappropriate because of the aspirational motif that seeks to transform the day into a *yom mishteh vi’simcha* or, possibly, even a *yom tov*. The inherently profane nature of Purim is possibly responsible for Rambam’s extreme view (*Hil. Aveil* 11:3) that *aveilut* is fully applicable on Purim — “*nohagin bahen kol divrei aveilut*.” Rambam’s definition of *seudah* draws upon the mitzvah of *simchat yom tov*, which is defined by meat and wine too. Rambam, unlike

other opinions, believed that the mitzvah of *simchat yom tov* still finds biblical expression even following the destruction of the Beit ha’Mikdash through the consumption of meat and wine: “There is no simcha other than with meat, and there is no simcha other than with wine” (*Hil. Yom Tov* 6:18 based on *Pesachim* 109a). The aspirational definition that Rambam introduces into the various mitzvot of the day all reflect this goal of transforming the day’s quality. Discrete mitzvah actions are quantifiable and can be objectively defined. The goal of Purim’s mitzvot, though, is to transform its quality of time. Toward that end, the transformation of the day’s quality as a “day of joy and celebration and gift-giving to friends and to the poor” is commensurate with the degree and extent of one’s investment.

The mitzvot’s goal-oriented focus of transforming the day’s character might be responsible for Rambam’s willing accommodation to anyone who extends their hand for *ma’ot Purim*. A process-oriented approach would treat the funds collected for *matanot li’evyonim* as earmarked for that mitzvah alone, and any distribution to an undeserving individual as a complete misappropriation of the money. All of the day’s mitzvot, however, are aimed at a common goal, the creation of a “*yom simcha umishteh*.” If the distributed funds qualify as *mishloach manot* rather than *matanot li’evyonim*, the shared primary goal might remain unaffected.

V. Matanot li’Evyonim and Rejoicing in God’s Presence

The aspirational quality of Purim day finds greatest expression in one’s

investment in *matanot li'evyonim*, surpassing both the importance of enhancing one's *seudah* "in accordance with one's financial needs" and the praiseworthiness of embellishing one's *mishloach manot*. Rambam explains:

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 preferable to give additional gifts to the poor rather than increase one's meal or deliver additional tributes to friends because there is no greater joy than to gladden the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widows and the converts, for one who gladdens the hearts of these distressed people is comparable to the Divine presence...

Hilkhos Megillah 2:17

The value expressed here is strikingly parallel to Rambam's description of *yom tov* (*Hil. Yom Tov* 6:18), where he places a great emphasis on providing to those in need in order to fulfill *simchat yom tov*.

Rambam's terminology, as well as the religious value of including less fortunate individuals in one's

celebration, are shared in the contexts of both Purim and *yom tov*. At the same time, the inverse relationship between Purim and *yom tov* is also captured in this very comparison. On *yom tov*, we are bidden to celebrate before God — "You shall rejoice before Hashem, your God" — and as part of that celebration, the verse continues, we are commanded to include individuals facing difficult challenges and compromised circumstances: "you ... the Levi within your gates, the convert, the orphan, and the widow amongst you" (Devarim 16:11). Hashem is the paradigm of compassion, mercy, kindness, and selfless giving, and, as a result, celebration in His presence must express itself through appreciating the source of one's bounty and through selfless giving. On Purim, the relationship is inverted. Whereas on *yom tov*, "rejoicing before Hashem" translates into acts of selfless giving, on Purim, acts of selfless, boundless giving create a "rejoicing before Hashem." By acting selflessly, empathetically, and kindly toward impoverished and downtrodden people, the divine quality of man comes to the fore: "one

who gladdens the heart of these unfortunate individuals is comparable to the Divine presence," as the Rambam writes in *Hilkhos Megillah*. The celebration of Purim is thus transformed into a "rejoicing before Hashem."

For this reason, *matanot li'evyonim* surpasses *seudat Purim* and *mishloach manot* in its aspirational quality and its ability to transform the character of the day. It, more than the others, can infuse the day with a *yom-tov*-esque quality of "rejoicing before Hashem." The "yom tov" quality (Esther 9:19) that was featured in the initial celebration of Purim was not rejected when it was later replaced by *matanot li'evyonim* (Esther 9:22) in the establishment of Purim as a holiday. Purim seeks to remind us that living in Hashem's presence and leading a divinely inspired life ought not be reserved exclusively for the *kedushat ha'zman* of the *yamim tovim* or for the *kedushat ha'makom* of the Beit ha'Mikdash. Even the ordinary can be made extraordinary and the profane into a quasi-"*yom tov*" when we tap into the divinity embedded in our humanity and engage in boundless, selfless giving to others.



Shoshanat Ya'akov: Seeing Mordechai through Rose-Colored Glasses

Shoshanat Ya'akov / Tzahala
Ve'Samecha / Bir'otam Yachad /
Techelet Mordechai.

The rose of Jacob / was cheerful
and glad / when they jointly saw /
Mordechai robed in royal blue.

A Jewish liturgical poet (*paytan*), of unknown identity and time, wrote this line toward the end of his *piyyut*, *Asher Heini*.¹ Despite its shroud of anonymity, *Asher Heini* is recited in Ashkenazic communities on Purim night immediately following the after-blessing on the Megillah reading.² *Shoshanat Ya'akov* is recited again after the daytime reading.³ What critically important message does *Shoshanat Ya'akov* convey that demands such prominent placement in the Megillah service?

Piyyutim reinforce and elucidate lessons from Tanach and other authentic Jewish sources. The best *piyyutim* succinctly recast these foundational ideas by borrowing phrases, language and motifs from our sacred writings and adeptly layering meaning upon meaning — even within one phrase or word. *Piyyutim* are popular because they condense ideas into easily remembered phrases and are timeless because they challenge the reader to pore over our primary texts and discover their messages. These qualities may help explain why our sages chose to incorporate selected *piyyutim* into formal Jewish prayer.



Rabbi Benjy Owen

Head of School,

Margolin Hebrew Academy-

Feinstone Yeshiva of the South, Memphis, TN

The Source Verse

Shoshanat Ya'akov restates the triumphant verse in Megillat Esther — its source verse — in which Mordechai, having been promoted to the lofty position of viceroy in King Achashverosh's court, leaves the king's presence robed in royal garments to the exultation of the citizens of Shushan (Esther 8:15):



וּמֶרְדֵּכַי יָצָא מִלְּפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, בִּלְבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת
תְּכֵלֶת וְחוּר, וְעֵטֶרֶת זָהָב גְּדוּלָּה, וְתִכְרִיף בָּרָז
וְאַרְגָּמָן; וְהָעִיר שׁוּשָׁן, צָהָלָה וְשִׂמְחָה.

*And Mordechai went forth from the
presence of the king in royal apparel of
blue and white, and with a great crown
of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and
purple; and the city of Shushan shouted
and was glad.*

Shoshanat Ya'akov was happy in seeing Techelet Mordechai

Shoshanat Ya'akov and *Techelet Mordechai* are the most interpretively rich phrases of the *piyyut*-line. What do they mean?

Shoshanat Ya'akov — The Rose of Jacob

Shoshanat Yaakov is a moniker for the Jewish People on two levels: poetic and figurative.⁴ On a poetic level, the word *shoshana* is a substitute for the similar-sounding Shushan. *Shoshanat Ya'akov* denotes the Jewish citizens of Shushan.⁵

Shoshanat Ya'akov carries an additional, allegorical, connotation. *Shoshana*, rose, is a word rarely used in Tanach, but used repeatedly in King Solomon's Shir HaShirim.⁶ Ostensibly a song to a lover, Shir HaShirim is interpreted by our sages as a metaphor about the deepest concepts of Jewish philosophy. King Solomon writes (Shir HaShirim 2:2), "Like the *shoshana* among the thorns; so is my beloved among the daughters." Rashi (based on Shir HaShirim Rabba 2:5) interprets this verse as a

comparison of the Jewish People to a rose: as a rose retains its vibrancy and beauty despite being surrounded by thorns, so do the Jewish People remain faithful to Hashem even when subjected to the spiritual trials of exile. *Shoshanat Ya'akov* metaphorically refers to the Jewish People who are faithful to Hashem.

Thus, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* describes the Jews of Shushan and those Jews who were faithful to Hashem. The *piyyut* informs us that these Jews were elated when they saw Mordechai wearing royal blue clothing.

On the surface, however, this statement sounds shallow, insignificant and not worthy of presentation in a *piyyut*. What is the significance of *Techelet Mordechai*?

Techelet Mordechai — Mordechai's Royal Blue

Techelet Mordechai I: Mordechai's Royal Clothing

Techelet is the first piece of clothing described in the source verse, and *Techelet Mordechai* can be understood as a reference to the multiple royal items of clothing that Mordechai wore when he left the presence of King Achashverosh.⁷ Hence, *Techelet Mordechai* connotes Mordechai's political promotion.

Significantly, Mordechai did not venture into the public arena immediately upon being named viceroy in the wake of Haman's execution. Instead, he remained in the king's presence until Esther successfully petitioned King Achashverosh to issue a new edict authorizing the Jews of each city to destroy those allied with Haman's plot. Only then did Mordechai leave

the king and venture into the public square wearing royal clothing.⁸

Malbim suggests that Mordechai's delay is an indication of his righteousness showing that he was solely focused on the welfare of the Jewish People. Although his new position assured his own safety, Mordechai ventured out in his royal garb only when he was sure that salvation had also arrived for his downtrodden Jewish brethren. The Brisker Rov suggests that the Jewish People understood how focused Mordechai was on the public good and the seriousness with which he took his own leadership responsibility.⁹ Therefore, when the people saw Mordechai wearing royal garb, they were overjoyed. They understood that his presence in public dressed in royal garments was not an act of self-aggrandizement — it was an indication of their miraculous salvation.

Although his new position assured his own safety, Mordechai ventured out in his royal garb only when he was sure that salvation had also arrived for his downtrodden Jewish brethren.

Techelet Mordechai II: End, in Contrast to the Beginning

Related to the Hebrew word *tachlit*, *techelet* has an alternate connotation — end.¹⁰ From this perspective, *Techelet Mordechai* refers to the

conclusion of the Mordechai saga — the end of his story in contrast to the beginning.¹¹

When King Achashverosh promoted Mordechai and issued a decree authorizing the Jews to defend themselves against all enemies, the trajectory of the Jewish People's fate instantly changed from destruction to exaltation. When the Jewish People saw that Mordechai had experienced a total reversal of fortune, they were happy because this turn of events also communicated their own miraculous salvation.

Techelet Mordechai III: Promoting Torah in the Public Square

In addition to its basic meaning, royal blue, *techelet* carries a halachic meaning. *Techelet* refers to the biblically-obligated blue string that a Jew must attach, along with white strings, to each corner of his four-cornered garment.¹² Therefore, *Techelet Mordechai* also refers to the halachic garb that Mordechai wore into the public space.¹³ Mordechai, with the consent of the king, promoted Torah values and dramatically displayed the importance of commitment to Torah observance. The Jewish People were happy because the sea-change in society's stance toward the Torah indicated their own miraculous salvation.

To summarize, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* gives context to the Purim story — it shares the perspective of those faithful Jews who reacted with exultation in seeing Mordechai wearing royal blue clothing. These Jews were overjoyed because they: understood that Mordechai, through wearing royal garb, was declaring their salvation; interpreted Mordechai's meteoric political rise as evidence of their

salvation; and, viewed Mordechai's freedom to publicly promote Torah values, in a society that had been hostile to these values, as an indication of their salvation. Thus, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* helps the Megillah-reader better appreciate (and emulate) the exultation of the Jewish People of Shushan.

Societies need Righteous Leaders

Shoshanat Ya'akov also conveys a universal message about a society's need for righteous leaders. The Talmud (*Megillah* 11a) teaches that the fourth-century *amora*, Rava, connects the source verse for *Shoshanat Ya'akov* (Esther 8:15) with a verse from Proverbs (29:2): "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; but when a wicked man rules, the people sigh." Rava teaches that "the righteous" refers to Mordechai and Esther and "a wicked man" refers to Haman. Rava's lesson anticipates an outcome from having righteous leaders — exultation, like that which the Jewish People experienced under the leadership of

Mordechai and Esther.

How does a society benefit from righteous leaders? Universalizing the interpretations above, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* outlines three such benefits.¹⁴ First, a righteous leader, like Mordechai or Esther, acts selflessly and the public benefits from his or her total commitment to the common welfare. Second, the public's fate is tied up with that of its leader — the beneficial influence that Divine Providence has on a righteous leader, like Mordechai or Esther, flows to those under his or her authority. Third, a righteous leader, like Mordechai or Esther, will promote and teach positive values.

In conclusion, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* is prominently placed because it enhances the Megillah reading experience. In eight significant words, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* helps us strengthen our identification with the jubilant Jews of Shushan by disclosing their mindset at that pivotal moment in the Purim story. Furthermore, *Shoshanat Ya'akov* is a clarion call to the members of all types of social structures — familial, communal

and national — exhorting us to seek righteous leaders. The selflessness of these leaders and their promotion of eternal Jewish values, through word and deed, will help the Jewish People receive Hashem's blessings and achieve ultimate salvation.

Endnotes

- 1 See A. Frankel, "Asher Heini: toledoteha shel beracha mefutehet" accessible at piyut.org.il.
- 2 *Hagahot Maimoniyot, Hilchot Megilla v'Chanukah* ch. 1.
- 3 *Machzor Kol Bo* (1699) v3 p373.
- 4 *Siddur Avodat Yisrael* (1901) p 448.
- 5 See Purim morning *Krovetz* for a similar play on words.
- 6 See also Psalms 69:1.
- 7 *Machzor Kol Bo* *ibid*.
- 8 Esther 8:1-14.
- 9 See *Reshimot Talmidim miMaran HaGriz HaLevi Soloveitchik* p. 209.
- 10 *Machzor Kol Bo* *ibid*.
- 11 *Midrash Tanchuma, Miketz* 3.
- 12 *Bamidbar* 15:38.
- 13 *Be'ur HaGR"A* on Esther 8:15.
- 14 See *Ralbag and Metzudat David* on Proverbs 29:2.



Kriyat Megillat Esther with Its Te'amim

One function of the *ta'amei hamkira* (cantillation marks or *trop*) is to provide a *ta'am* — a taste to the narrative. While one ought to consider how the *te'amim* provide musical interpretation throughout the Tanach, Megillat Esther in particular, is best understood in its musical context, for this medium expresses significant nuances in the dramatic tale.

The most striking demonstrations are when we consider verses which are identical in wording but differ only in their *te'amim*. Thus the reader must be sensitive to consider how the tune's ascending or descending progressions communicate differences between the characters and events the words are describing. Here are two such examples from the Megillah.

The *te'amim* alone distinguish between the way Esther and the other candidates in the harem presented themselves before King Achashverosh:

וּבְהִגֵּיעַ תֹּר־אֶסְתֵּר בֵּת-אָבִיהָ לֵד מְרֹדֶכִי
אֲשֶׁר לָקַח-לָוּ לְבַת

When the turn came for Esther daughter of Avichayil — the uncle of Mordechai who had adopted her as a daughter.

Esther 2:15

וּבְהִגֵּיעַ תֹּר נַעֲרָה וְנַעֲרָה לְכוּא | אֶל-הַמֶּלֶךְ
אֲחַשְׁוֵרֹשׁ

When each girl's turn came to go to King Achashverosh.

Esther 2:12



Ms. Sarah Robinson

Limmudei Kodesh Educator,

Rae Kushner Yeshiva High School (Livingston, NJ)

Whereas the other candidates in the harem arrived before the king with the *te'amim* of *pazer*, *tlisha*, *kadma v'azla*, and a *ligarmeim munach revii* — a sequence that is theatrical and complex, Esther, came before the king but with one difference: a series of four *munachim* — subtle, gentle notes. Perhaps these *te'amim* indicate how those women came to Achashverosh with a flamboyant, forward, and loud

explained why Esther was preferred over the other candidates.

Another instance of this phenomenon is when we consider how Haman and Mordechai's edicts were written and sent.

וַיִּכְתֹּב כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה הַמֶּלֶךְ

and it was written, as Haman directed
Esther 3:12

וַיִּכְתֹּב כָּל-אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּה מְרֹדֶכִי אֶל-הַיְּהוּדִים
and it was written, as Mordechai directed, to the Jews
Esther 8:9

When Haman sent his edict calling for the annihilation of the Jewish people, there is a series of two *muncachim* then a *pazer* above his name — a *ta'am* that calls for an ascending progression of notes. I heard from Rav Mordechai Willig that Haman hoped his edict would result in a social and political ascent which the Chachamim chose to demonstrate using the *pazer* note. Thus the *pazer* note on his name reflects his internal desire for upward promotion and personal achievement, even at the expense of the Jewish people.

Contrast that with Mordechai when he sends out an edict alerting the Jewish people that they have the right



demeanor which Achashverosh found to be intimidating and unwelcome — and thus chose to give the queenship to Esther, a woman who exuded a grace and *tzniut* in her presentation. Indeed, following his night with Esther, he “loved” Esther more than the other candidates and therefore crowned her as queen (Esther 2:17). Thus, it was the *te'amim* which

to self-defense on the 14th of Adar. Like Haman, there is also a series of *munachim* and a *pazer*. However, the *pazer* does not appear above Mordechai's name but rather on the word "*hayehudim*," thereby indicating that Mordechai's primary concern was the upward and outward growth of his people. Indeed, this marks Mordechai as a true leader — someone who is not concerned about his personal achievement but rather the needs of his people.

This difference also explains how the two edicts were sent. Whereas the *te'amim* change to Eicha *trop* on the words "*haratzim yatzu dechufim bidvar hamelech*" — The couriers went out hastily on the royal mission — when Haman sent his edict (Esther 3:15), the *ba'al koreh* uses a special celebratory tune for those very words when introducing Mordechai's edict permitting the Jewish people to self-defense (Esther 8:14). This celebratory tune is meant to introduce the following verse (which the *kahal* recites aloud) where Mordechai wore royal garb and Shushan was joyous (Esther 8:15). This distinction in tune

shows how Haman's leadership was cause for mourning while Mordechai's was cause for joy and communal bonding. Speaking more broadly, the reader now hears how both the writing and sending of Haman and Mordechai's decrees provide a lens into their intentions, personalities, and efficacy.

Perhaps more well known than the above mentioned examples is when we consider how the *ba'al koreh* diverges from Esther *trop* into tunes used at other times of the Jewish calendar. No less than seven times the *ba'al koreh* oscillates from Esther into Eicha (Esther 1:7, 2:6, 3:15, 4:1, 4:3, 4:16, 7:4). Perhaps these somber spurts of Eicha *trop* reveal how Esther's story is indeed serious, even sometimes chaotic and tragic, even if it might have otherwise seemed comedic and satirical. Beyond the inclusion of Eicha *trop*, many *ba'alei keriyah* diverge from Esther *trop* into the *te'amim* for the Yamim Noraim on the words "*balayla hahu nadida shnat hamelech*" — "on that night, the slumber of the king was disturbed" — to signal to the

reader that this moment is akin to Yom Kippur, for on that night, Achashverosh read from his *Sefer HaZichronot*, rewarded Mordechai for his bravery and simultaneously humiliated Haman by forcing him to parade his enemy, Mordechai, around Shushan wearing royal garb. This shift into *trop* for Yamim Noraim indicates how, on that night, Achashverosh was modeling HaShem's role as an arbiter who studies each person's past to determine their punishment or reward — much like what HaShem does on the Yamim Noraim. Thus, these divergences from Esther *trop* into Eicha or Yamim Noraim musically link Esther's narrative to other times in the Jewish Calendar.

Thus from these *limmudim* we hear how the *ta'amei hamkra* indeed provide a *ta'am*, a taste to this narrative by providing nuanced insight into the characters and undercurrents of the narrative. The above mentioned examples are but a few of many. May we be *zocheh* to find several more examples when our communities read Megillat Esther this year!



The Dawn of Jewish History

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 685:22) suggests that the dawn referred to in Psalms (22) — “a psalm upon the morning dawn” — is a reference to Queen Esther; just as the dawn represents the end of the night, Esther marked the end of the era of miraculous salvations recorded in the Tanakh. Indeed, Megilat Esther is one of the last books in Tanakh, and essentially closed the period of the prophets. [In fact, in *Megilah 7a*, the Talmud debates whether or not Esther itself was written with *ruach hakodesh*.] Since that time, we have been denied the privilege of direct communication with God, who we can now speak to only through prayer, and hear only through Torah study. Undoubtedly, this has resulted in much confusion as to the true understanding of the Torah.

It is quite striking that the midrash utilizes the dawn as the metaphor for this shift. The dawn ends the night and begins the day, which promises clarity and brilliance that illuminates the darkness. In what way is this parallel to the close of the miraculous, prophetic era? Wouldn't dusk be a more apropos metaphor for this transitional period of Jewish history?

I believe that this metaphor is very deliberate and exact, and in fact highlights a fundamental truth and tension in Judaism. The prophetic era was truly transcendent, but relegated humanity to the position



Rabbi Kenneth Schiowitz

Talmud Department Chair and Rosh Beit Midrash,
Ramaz Upper School, New York, NY
Rabbi, Cong. Shaarei Tefila, Teaneck, NJ

of passive recipient. The prophets were often literally and figuratively asleep during their prophetic visions. It is true that there was a need for our national history to be founded upon an era of direct revelation. This allowed for the foundational truths



of our faith to be communicated with clarity, and provided a firm basis to support our rich tradition. However, the impact of this divine period was limited and the prophets' words were often unheeded. This period was designed to be followed by a phase in which our people would become actively involved in the creation, interpretation, and application of these truths to our lives. Esther marked the end of that unique era of prophecy, and ushered in a potentially brighter phase during which the Jewish People would become active in the creation of our own religious destiny, led by creative and courageous scholars and leaders.

These two dimensions of our religious experience are also symbolized by the dual revelation at Sinai, in the form of the Written Law and the Oral Law. The Written Law was dictated word for word by God to Moshe. It represents unblemished truth and absolute perfection, providing the foundation for our tradition. The Oral Law, comprised of scholarly debates interpreting the Torah and defining the parameters of the *halakha*, is a definitively human endeavor. The guarantee that the Torah would remain with the Jewish People throughout history would be our inclusion in the process and, the exchange of perfection for participation in order to achieve perpetuation.

Moshe epitomizes the dimension that is represented by the Written Law. Every significant act that Moshe performed in respect to the Jewish People was instructed explicitly and directly by God, and only he heard the entire Torah from God. However, because Moshe heard everything directly from God, he never received Torah in the form of Oral Tradition. The Talmud (*Menachot 29a*) metaphorically describes the experience that Moshe had as he

envisioned himself in the classroom of Rabbi Akiva. As Moshe witnessed Rabbi Akiva's interpretations and extrapolations of every letter of the Torah, he did not understand where they had come from. Ultimately Moshe was surprised and gratified when Rabbi Akiva attributed his lesson to a "tradition from Moshe from Sinai." Moshe was unfamiliar with the process of interpretation and originality in understanding the Torah. Nevertheless, he ultimately understood that this was the design that was so brilliantly constructed at Sinai. Rebbe Akiva was a champion of the Oral Law, following the lead of Yehoshua, who was the first person to receive the Oral Tradition and begin this process.

Immediately after the exodus from Egypt, the Torah describes the war with Amalek (Exodus 17:8-16). In this war, Yehoshua took over as leader and led the Jews to victory. However, this war was not won through any obvious miracle. The people fought and, for the first time, were engaged in their struggles. Until this point, everything had occurred miraculously, by God, through Moshe and his "magical staff." From this point on, however, the people were involved. Yehoshua, the champion of the Oral Law, led the People into this new era that continued throughout the conquest of the Land of Israel. Moshe, who remained present in the background, held his hands heavenwards, with no mention of a "magical staff" in his hands. Now it would be the hands of man that would take on the responsibility.

The hands of Moshe were associated with success, as we were victorious

when Moshe's hands were raised (Exodus 17:11). Nevertheless, the midrash (*Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashana 29a*) counters: "Could the hands of Moshe affect military success?" Certainly, the interpretation of the verse is that when Moshe's hands were held high, the spirit and attitude of the people were directed heavenwards, and, in return, God ensured their success. This midrash is particularly striking, considering the fact that the hands of Moshe so recently brought about the plagues and the splitting of the sea! Clearly the midrash understands the significant change that the Jewish People were making, from a "Written Law experience" led by Moshe to a human, "Oral Law experience," led by Yehoshua.

Purim also celebrates a military victory of the Jewish People over the descendants of Amalek. The Midrash notes that when the lottery of Haman landed in Adar, he immediately became extremely confident of his success, as he knew that Moshe died during Adar. Clearly, Haman reasoned, this month represents the downfall of the Jewish People and foreshadowed his success as well. Haman understood the notion of the Written Law and therefore understood the significance of Moshe. However, Haman could not fathom the overwhelming power of the Oral Law. He interpreted the death of Moshe as a symbol of the downfall of the Jewish People, but he did not understand that from the perspective of the Oral Law, death represents a rebirth and an opportunity for the creation of a renewed vibrancy and life. Therefore, Haman was defeated in exactly the same way that his ancestors were at Refidim.

In this vein, the Talmud (*Temurah 16b*) tells us that the 1,700 teachings that were forgotten during the period of mourning following the death of Moshe were deduced by Otniel ben Kenaz through superb analysis. My teacher, Rav Chaim Yaakov Goldvicht *zt"l*, suggested that this episode is a clear application of the lesson of the aforementioned midrash, and perfectly depicts the character of the Oral Law. Therefore, it is most appropriate that although the Jews were coerced into accepting the Oral Law at Sinai (*Midrash Tanchuma 68:3*), it was willingly reaccepted on Purim (*Shabbat 88a*, see *Asufot Maarachot*, p.55-59). This acceptance was most apropos for Purim, because everything about Purim represents the essence of the Oral Law. The name of God is strikingly absent from the Megillah because everything that happened was a result of human initiative, with God assisting only from behind the scenes. Therefore, it is in this sense that Esther truly personified the early dawn, which closed the era of prophecy and miraculous salvations, but ushered in a period of human innovation and involvement in the active transmission and development of Torah and halacha. This transmission has faced many challenges on all fronts, including persecution, assimilation, internal conflicts, and mere forgetfulness. Nevertheless, it has been a result of this *mesora* that has given the Torah the vibrancy and human investment that has allowed it to flourish until today.

Purim: A Recommitment to Torah Sheba'al Peh

The Gemara in *Shabbos* 88a, records that until the holiday of Purim, the Jewish people were coerced into accepting the Torah. On the holiday of Purim, we accepted the Torah willingly for the first time. We learn it out from a seemingly disorganized pasuk at the end of the Megilla (9:27), which states “*kimu v’kiblu*” — they established and then accepted. How can one establish that which they have not yet accepted? The Gemara explains that the Jewish people established willingly that which they had earlier accepted unwillingly.

Tosafos ad loc. asks the obvious question: How can the Gemara suggest that the Jews were forced into accepting the Torah when they said “*na’aseh v’nishmah*” — we will do and we will understand — at Har Sinai? The Jewish people at that time were credited and praised with accepting the Torah willingly without fully knowing what the mitzvos were. How can the Gemara here suggest that they were forced into accepting the Torah when they explicitly accepted the Torah enthusiastically? The *Midrash Tanchuma*, *Noach* no. 3, explains that we accepted the Written Torah — *Torah Shebichsav* — readily but were pressured into accepting the Oral Torah — *Torah Sheba'al Peh*. On the holiday of Purim, we accepted the Oral Torah willingly. What changed? Why did the Jewish people refuse to accept the *Torah Sheba'al Peh* willingly until the miracle of Purim?



Rabbi Moshe Schochet

Head of School, Hadar High School for Girls

Boca Raton, FL

עז והדר לבושה



One suggestion is offered by the Netziv, in an essay titled “*Be'ur Klali Al Nes Purim*” in *Ha'amek Davar* at the end of Sefer Shemos. Until the first Bais Hamikdash was destroyed, the Jewish people were exposed to the wondrous miracles of Hashem in an open and revealed manner. Whether it be in the desert, in the conquest of Eretz Yisroel or in the Bais Hamkidash itself, Hashem's conduct was recognizable. However, when the Bais Hamkidash was destroyed, Hashem concealed himself in a manner that required effort to see His hand in the world. As we all know, the whole premise and theme of Purim is that Hashem saved the Jewish people while remaining hidden. Therefore, when Klal Yisrael saw for the first time Hashem's hand working behind the scenes, they came to the realization that the more concealed Torah, the *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, needs more focus. It is for this reason that at this moment in time, they accepted the *Torah Sheba'al Peh* willingly.

Rav Chaim Freidlander, *Sifsei Chaim*, *Moadim* Vol. II (pp. 232-234), offers an alternative explanation. He explains that the reason the Jewish people were almost annihilated was because they refused to heed the warnings of Mordechai about not going to Achashverosh's party. Instead, they all went and participated. In the end, it was Mordechai, in conjunction with Esther, who helped save the Jews from complete and utter destruction. Mordechai represented *Torah Sheba'al Peh* as a member of the *Anshei Kneses Hagedolah*. Therefore, it became very clear to the Jewish people that not listening to *Torah Sheba'al Peh* (Mordechai) was what led to their precarious situation, and it was listening to *Torah Sheba'al Peh* (Mordechai) that saved them. As a result of the miracle of Purim, the Jewish people willingly reaffirmed their commitment to *Torah Sheba'al Peh*.

As we celebrate the holiday of Purim, let us reflect on re-energizing our learning of *Torah Sheba'al Peh* and reaffirming our observance of *Torah Sheba'al Peh*, as it is truly the safeguard of our continued relationship with Hashem.

The Space Between Us: The Role of Place in the Purim Story

Invitations and Hosts

When receiving an invitation, it's important to know the difference between the venue and the host. Sometimes the difference proves rather inconsequential. An official invitation to a White House party does not necessarily come from the President, even if the President is hosting the party. Perhaps an underling signed the invitation, but the insignia on top of the stationary makes it perfectly clear who is truly hosting. In the workplace, we often desire to "be in the room." Everyone wants to be in the place where the decisions are made. Less attention, however, is paid to who is hosting the meeting. Once you're invited, does it even matter whose room it is? A careful analysis of the invitations throughout the Megillah may provide crucial insight for some of the discussions about space and gender that are exceedingly relevant today.

Whose Party Is This?

Vashti wanted to host her own party. Her husband, Achashverosh, indulged her — but only to a point:

גַּם וַשְׁתִּי הַמֶּלֶכָה, עָשְׂתָה מִשְׁתֵּה נָשִׁים--בֵּית, הַמְּלָכוֹת, אֲשֶׁר, לְמֶלֶךְ אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ.

Queen Vashti also made a feast for women, in the royal palace of King Achashverosh.

Esther 1:9



Mrs. Atara Segal

Judaic Studies Faculty and Machgiach Ruchanit,
Shalvehet High School, Los Angeles, CA

Vashti could host a party for women, but only insofar as it remained an extension of the king's domain. Sure, she could have a "mishteh nashim," but it would always be considered an extension of the "beis hamalchus" — the house of the king. The Megillah seems to subtly presage Vashti's incipient desire for independence by introducing her party with the term "gam" — also. Her party was not convened on its own terms, but was a reactionary response that — just like her husband — *she too* wanted a party that would cement her monarchy.



The role of host appears again prominently in the aftermath of Vashti's death, when Achashverosh searches for a new queen. Initially, the search describes the destination for the women auditioning to be queen as the "house of women" (Esther 2:3):

וַיִּפְקֹד הַמֶּלֶךְ פְּקִידִים, בְּכָל-מְדִינוֹת מְלָכוֹתוֹ, וַיִּקְבְּצוּ אֶת-כָּל-נַעֲרָה-בְּתוּלָה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה אֶל-שׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה אֶל-בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים, אֶל-יַד הַגִּי שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים.

סְרִיס הַמֶּלֶךְ שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים; וְנָתַן, תַּמְרָקִיָּהּ.

Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hegeh, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics.

The moment Esther is taken, however, she discovers that the "house of women" was just a guise. Just five verses later, the title of the location "beis hanashim" is discarded, revealing the true destination — the *beis hamelech* (Megillas Esther 2:8):

וַיְהִי, בְּהִשְׁמַע דְּבַר-הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ, וּבְהַקְבִּץ נַעֲרוֹת רַבּוֹת אֶל-שׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה, אֶל-יַד הַגִּי; וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל-בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ, אֶל-יַד הַגִּי שֹׁמֵר הַנָּשִׁים.

When the king's order and edict was proclaimed, and when many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Hegai, Esther was also taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women.

Breaching the king's space remains a terrorizing prospect throughout the Megillah. Nobody, the Megillah emphasizes (see 4:18), is permitted to enter without prior invitation. It is in this space that women, be it Vashti

or Esther, lose their agency. Guests of the “House of the King” remain just that — guests. The physical environs of the king are presented within the Megillah as a telling imagery of the king’s influence and control.

Finding Our Place

Esther, seeing the pattern of special dominion exerted by Achashverosh, develops a plan. To assert her independence and agency, she realizes that she needs to carve out her own space. She hosts her *own* party. Nowhere in the description of Esther’s party does the otherwise ubiquitous term “*beis hamelech*” appear (See 5:4-5). Esther realizes that to shift from a passive pawn into an active mechanism in the destiny of her people, she needs to self-determine. In a telling act of reciprocity for Esther’s insistence of her own space, after Haman’s demise it is she who is awarded the house of Haman (8:1). Esther’s commitment to her own sovereignty, epitomized by establishing her own place, is rewarded by her receipt of the place of her enemy.

Esther is not alone in equating her autonomous space with her capacity for leadership. Devorah’s leadership is described in the context of the *tomar Devorah*, the shaded area under the palm tree where she adjudicated for the Jewish people (Shoftim 4:4). Later on, during the war initiated by Devorah, Yael vanquishes the enemy in “*ohel Yael*” — the tent of Yael. While she is described as “Eshes Chever HaKeini” — her identity marked by her husband — her place was uniquely hers. Of course, this emphasis on space as a part of female identity began with the founding women of our nation.

Rivkah, who runs specifically to her mother’s tent when Eliezer asks her if there is room for hospitality in her “father’s home,” takes her place in the Matriarchy only when she perpetuates the *ohel* of Sarah (compare Eliezer’s requests to Rivka’s actions in Bereishis 24). Repeatedly, Tanakh has shown us that women are ultimately most successful when they take charge of their own physical space. Once they establish their own home base, they can take decisive action.

So, What is Our Response?

Here too, the Megillah story is instructive. We need to entrust women with spaces in which to operate with strength. Broadly, women have the opportunity to create spaces that represent morality in areas where the rest of society has failed. In situations where absence of respect for others humans has chipped away at the very foundations of interpersonal relationships, women can build them up again. There are appropriate and effective ways for women to take leadership roles and present themselves publicly (in person and in media) and help promote the value of all people.

The example set by our matriarchs applies today. The *Beis Yosef, Orach Chaim* no. 417, elaborates on the Talmudic explanation for the practice of women to refrain from *melacha* on Rosh Chodesh. While the *shalosh regalim* parallel the Avos, Rosh Chodesh was intended as a holiday in honor of the twelve Shevatim. However, with the *cheit ha’egel*, the holiday was lost by the general population and retained by the women. *Beis Yosef* notes that since a woman is normally “*nigreres achar*

ha’ish” — follows her husband — it would have made sense that when the holiday aspect of Rosh Chodesh was withheld at the *cheit ha’egel*, it should have been withheld as a holiday from the entire population, regardless of gender. If men, in the *Beis Yosef*’s terminology, the “*ikar*” (primary), lost it, then women, as “*tafel*” (secondary), should have lost it as well. That, however was not the case. Women were given Rosh Chodesh as their personal holiday.

The language of the *Beis Yosef* is significant. Had women merely been “*nigraros*” — literally dragged along after their husbands — both in the sin and the aftermath, Bnei Yisrael would have been in a materially more compromised position. But by refusing to contribute their gold to the creation of the Golden Calf, the women saved the nation in that moment and carved out their own holiday for the future. Because they were not *tafel* to their husbands at the *cheit ha’egel*, they didn’t become *tafel* when the holiday was taken away.

Our spaces can define our agency. It is not enough for women to just be appended; they need to model the attitudes and relationships that will cultivate healthy professional, personal and religious interactions. That can only happen if women develop arenas where such behavior is celebrated. Whether it is Esther’s party, *tomar Devorah*, *ohel Yael*, or *ohel Sarah*, the spaces that women create can serve as templates for healthy ecosystems of collective growth; places where women not only invite, but also host.

The Hidden Meaning

The Rambam in his *Moreh Nevuchim* (2:45) delineates eleven levels of prophecy. Each level directly parallels the level of perfection achieved by the prophet or holy person. In other words, the greater the prophet, the greater his/her ability to speak the word of God. For example, the first and lowest level of Divine inspiration described by Rambam is when one speaks with the “the spirit of God” (*Ruach Elokim*), and culminates with Moshe Rabbeinu’s level, which in terms of transmission and clarity is a qualitatively different type of prophecy than that of all of prophets.

Rambam goes on to explain that each of the three sections of Tanakh was written with hierarchical levels of Divine inspiration. The Torah, being the direct word of God, was written with the highest level; the Prophetic (Navi) books were written with a lower level of prophecy; and finally the books of K’suvim (Writings) with an even lower level of Divine inspiration. The inclusion of Megillas Esther within Tanakh shows that Chazal deemed it to be written with a level of Divine inspiration.

Although Esther is listed as one of the seven prophetesses, the Gemara, in *Tractate Megilla* 7a, retells the story of Esther’s failed attempt and eventual success to include Megillas Esther within Tanakh. The Gemara there details the argument among the early Sages as to which verse in Megillas Esther proves that it was written with Divine inspiration:



Rabbi Sandy Shulkes

Rebbe and Director of Student Activities, 9th Grade,
YULA Boys School, Los Angeles, CA

תניא, רבי אליעזר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמרה ויאמר המן בלבן. רבי עקיבא אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ותהי אסתר נשאת חן בעיני כל רואיה. רבי מאיר אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ויודע הדבר למרדכי. רבי יוסי בן דורמסקית אומר: אסתר ברוח הקודש נאמרה, שנאמר ובבזה לא שלחו את ידם. אמר שמואל: אי הואי התם הוה אמינא מלתא דעדיפא מכולהו, שנאמר קימו וקבלו — קימו למעלה מה שקיבלו למטה.



R. Eliezer said: Megillas Esther was written with Ru'ach ha-Kodesh. We learn this from "Haman said in his heart (the king wants to honor me)"; R. Akiva says, we learn this from "Esther bore grace in the eyes of all who saw her." R. Meir learns this from "The matter became known to Mordechai." R. Yosi ben Dormaskis learns this from "They did not take from the spoils." Shmuel:

Better than all these sources is "they fulfilled and accepted" — they fulfilled in Heaven what they accepted below.

The Gemara explains why each opinion has a flaw until we arrive at Shmuel’s proof. For example, R. Akiva assumed that no human could have written that everyone found Esther attractive, as how could one person possibly know that? So, it must be that Megillas Esther was Divinely inspired. However, one could make the case that everyone found beauty in her because she appeared to each as though she was a native of the onlooker’s country. So we need not invoke a Divine perspective to explain the verse.

Eventually, the Talmud accepts the last proof suggested by the Amora Shmuel. But since the Talmud knew that the last opinion had no flaw, what did the Talmud gain by recording four Tannaitic opinions that are rejected one after another? There must be something we can learn from those four proofs even if they are rejected.

Before we read the Megillah on Purim night, we make the blessing *al mikrah megillah*, without noting which Megillah we are reading. One would have thought that the blessing should be “*al mikra Megillas Esther*.” It appears that the blessing itself is hinting at a deeper notion of the word

“megilla.” Since God’s hand remains hidden in the natural world, and yet is intertwined within the natural course of events, it’s easy to go through life and not recognize His directing hand in our everyday lives. Megillas Esther is therefore called “the megillah,” as the very nature of the book is to *megaleh* (to reveal) the hidden. So while the word “megillah” usually only refers to the fact that a book is a scroll, by Megillas Esther, it is called “the megillah,” hinting at the fact that it is the ideal type of megillah: one that lives up to the literal sense of the word and to its exposition.

Indeed, Megillas Esther is the book that leaves us with the final lesson for living in exile, namely that God

is directing our everyday lives even if we do not always feel that way. God’s directing hand can be found in the narrative throughout the storyline of the Megillah, which is demonstrated through the verses the Tanna’im mention in the Gemara. Each Tanna focuses on a different character or

Megillas Esther is the book that leaves us with the final lesson for living in exile, namely that God is directing our everyday lives even if we do not always feel that way.

scene that could be glanced over without recognizing its significance. Whether it was Esther, Mordechai or Haman: each of their thoughts and actions were part of the grand scheme of events unfolding in the Megillah. This understanding gives us a deeper insight into why the Talmud records the various rejected opinions of the Tanna’im. Keeping in mind the goals of the Megillah, it’s important to read through the entire story and see that God is directing each move, step and thought. We should not only appreciate that Hashem saves the Jewish people and turning the whole story around, but we should go through each verse and try to see God’s Divine intervention in each event.

A number of commentaries ask: The Gemara’s discussion about whether Esther was written with Divine inspiration is really about whether the book itself was a Divinely ordained book or whether it was a personal recollection of the events. Nobody ever questioned whether Mordechai and Esther were prophets. Why then does the Gemara prove that the book was Divinely ordained from various verses that prove that they knew things that only those with prophecy could have known? How does this prove that the book itself was Divinely ordained and not personal recollections of the events that also include a recollection of their prophetic visions? R. Yehonatan Eibeschitz, *Ye’arot Devash* 2:2, suggests that Mordechai and Esther were very humble people. If they were writing a book of personal recollections, they would not have included parts that hint to their being prophets. The only explanation for including these hints is because the book itself was Divinely ordained and they were not given the choice as to whether to include these hints.

Torah To Go Editors



Purim: Finding Meaning and Passion in Our Mitzvos

When we reflect on the story of Megillas Esther, we tend to think about great courage, heroic sacrifices and hidden miracles. However, what can easily get overlooked due to the happy ending, is that the Jewish People of Shushan (and throughout the kingdom of Achashveirosh) faced a real and serious danger. In fact, the Midrash (*Esther Rabba* 7:14) explains that Haman's decree of destruction described in the Megillah was actually written in the Heavens and accepted by Hakadosh Baruch Hu Himself. What was the generation guilty of in the Heavenly Court that this decree was seemingly justified?

About 1,800 years ago, the students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked their Rebbe this very same question (*Megilla* 12a). As the expert teacher that he was, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai challenged his students to offer their own thoughts before sharing his answer. The students felt that the decree was because the Jews of Shushan attended and enjoyed the feast of Achashveirosh, while Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai explained that it was a result of worshipping an idol.¹

However, according to the Midrash, there seems to be something else that contributed to the dire situation; something that was missing from the life of the Jewish People and something that we can think about as well as we celebrate Purim.



Rabbi Elon Soniker

Faculty, YU High School for Boys, New York, NY

Rabbi, Cong. Anshei Shalom, West Hempstead, NY

In Chapter 4 of Megillas Esther, after the letters proclaiming the upcoming destruction of the Jewish People were sent out, the entire Jewish nation began to mourn. Mordechai, the leader of the Jewish People, even arrived to work at the gates of the palace in sackcloth and ashes. When Queen Esther heard that Mordechai showed up dressed this way, she sent her messenger with a change of clothing, because she felt it was not appropriate to be in the palace dressed in sackcloth. Mordechai refused to change and Esther asked what was going on (*al zeh v'al mazel* — 4:6).



EST. 1916

The Midrash (*Esther Rabba* 8:4) explains that Esther was not simply asking why Mordechai insisted on remaining in his mourner's clothing. Rather, like the students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, she noted that

the Jewish People had not been threatened with this level of danger in a very long time. What are they guilty of? Are they guilty of not beautifying the mitzvos or are they guilty of not observing the Ten Commandments?

In other words, what horrible sins did *Klal Yisrael* commit to be guilty of such a terrible decree? If I were Esther, I would have suggested something extreme — like her second suggestion: Are they no longer keeping the Ten Commandments? If that is the case, then we could at least understand the harsh response and the grave danger. However, the Midrash writes that Esther had another suggestion: Maybe the Jewish People are not fulfilling *hiddur mitzvah* and not beautifying the mitzvos.

Did Queen Esther suggest that because the Jews of Shushan were not buying the nicest esrogim on Sukkos or using the nicest shofar on Rosh Hashana they deserved a decree of destruction? Why would that contribute to such a harsh decree against the Jewish People? We can begin to answer with a Gemara (*Megilla* 13b), which seems equally as puzzling. When Haman unveiled

his plan to Achashveirosh to wipe out the Jewish People, Achashveirosh was nervous that Hashem would punish him as He did to Pharaoh in Egypt. Haman told Achashveirosh that he had nothing to be worried about because the Jewish People were sleeping through their fulfillment of the mitzvos (see Maharsha there).

Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Sofer (1815-1871), in his *Ksav Sofer*, explained that Haman did not claim that the Jewish People were not keeping the mitzvos — because they were. If they were not observing the mitzvos, then Achashveirosh would have had nothing to worry about. Rather, they were executing the mitzvos, but there was something missing in the performance — they were sleepwalking through the mitzvos.

When a person performs an action while sleepwalking, the action might look correct. However, there is something missing — it is devoid of any meaning. It is empty, thoughtless and absent-minded.

Mitzvos are not meant to be dry and robotic actions — they are supposed to be alive and exciting. The mitzvos are full of value, depth and holiness. They are opportunities to connect with Hashem and develop a meaningful relationship with Him by feeling His presence in our lives. However, in order to accomplish this, we must be mindful and conscious in our deeds.

The Jewish People in the Purim story were going through the motions of the mitzvos and it looked, on the surface, like everything was alright. But the actions were being done by rote

and without passion. There was no enthusiasm or excitement. No feelings or emotions. Their heart was not in it.

This explains why the Midrash (*Esther Rabba* 9:4) describes that the turning point of the Megilla in the Heavenly Court was when Hashem heard the passion-filled cries and prayers of the Jewish children in Shushan after Haman said that he would murder them the next day. Those heartfelt tefillos had the same effect as a shofar on Rosh Hashana and caused Hashem to move from His seat of judgment to His seat of mercy. Because of this, Hashem ripped up the decree of genocide and replaced it with salvation and protection.

Maybe this is what Queen Esther meant when she suggested to Mordechai that the Jewish People were guilty of this terrible decree because they did not beautify the mitzvos. We beautify that which is important to us and that which we are passionate and enthusiastic about. If our home is important to us, we beautify our homes. If our phone is important, we upgrade to the newest and fastest phone. If our clothing is important, we keep up with the latest styles and fashions.

If our mitzvos are important to us, then we try to make them beautiful — both the objects that we use to do the mitzva as well as the way that we perform them. *Hiddur mitzva* is not just a nice thing to do — it represents how much of a priority the mitzva is. If the mitzva is something that we care about and cherish as an opportunity to fulfill the will of Hashem and connect to Him in a meaningful way, then we do not perform the mitzva on

its most basic level. Rather, we want it to be beautiful, which expresses our appreciation of the mitzva and our love of Hashem.²

Of all the Jewish holidays on our calendar, Purim is one of the most joyous and celebrated. The festive meals, the costumes, the singing and dancing and the friendly exchange of *mishloach manos* all contribute to the jubilant atmosphere of the day. We certainly do not sleepwalk through the mitzvos of Purim. Rather, we perform them with excitement, fervor and delight as we recognize the value of these cherished and passion-filled moments of spirituality and meaning. Purim is a day to inject additional feeling and focus into our mitzvos and open our hearts to grow in our relationship with Hashem.

Of course, the celebration of the day is also an opportunity to communicate to our children the value and priority of the Torah and mitzvos in our lives by exhibiting the enthusiasm, joy and meaning that we have in our performance of them. There is no better way to educate our children than by showing them through our own actions, and being their greatest role models.

Wishing you and your families a meaningful and joyous Purim.

Endnotes

1 See Rashi here and Tosfos, *Kesubos* 33b, for further discussion regarding this issue.

2 This can also explain why the Gemara (*Shabbos* 88a) writes that the Jewish People received the Torah again on Purim, but this time around it was done voluntarily and willingly.

Video Conferencing the Megillah

Most mitzvos are performed in private, and there is no inherent value to the specific mitzvah when performed in public. Conversely, there are many halachic obligations that require a minyan, such as Kedusha, Kaddish and Krias HaTorah. These mitzvos cannot be performed at all privately. Megillah is rare in that it is a mitzvah that can be performed privately, and yet we recommend it be read with a minyan.

This unique quality of reading the Megillah raises interesting questions based on today's technology. Can we combine ten people who can see and hear the reader via the internet? Alternatively, if ten people are together in one room and that reading of the Megillah was broadcast live via video-conference, would others watching on their phones or computers at home be considered part of the minyan? [Note: according to the majority of poskim, hearing the Megillah via the internet does not constitute "hearing" the Megillah at all. However, for the purposes of this article, we will assume the lenient position of the Chazon Ish, quoted by Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, zt"l, (*Minchas Shlomo* 9, fn 4) who permits the use of a digital sound if the listener hears it without a delay.] This article will analyze the enhancement of the megillah when read in a minyan, the qualifications needed for those to form and participate in a minyan and



Rabbi Aryeh Stechler

Rosh Yeshiva, Heichal Hatorah, Teaneck, NJ

whether video-conferencing meets those qualifications. [This article is not intended for psak halacha or to address the meta-halachic issue of use of technology to perform mitzvos in a different manner than previous generations. These matters should be discussed with poskim.]



HEICHAL
HATORAH
ישיבת היכל התורה

Is a Minyan Needed for Megillah?

The Gemara, in *Megillah* 5a, debates whether a minyan is needed for Megillah. According to Rav, Megillah read at its normal time, on the 14th, does not require a minyan. Rav Asi argues that all Megillah readings require a minyan.

The Mordechai, *Megillah* no. 782,

quotes many authorities who rule that Megillah should be read only with a minyan, and if no minyan is present, the Megillah is read without a beracha. Why would Megillah require a minyan? He quotes Rabbeinu Gershom, "that there is no obligation on each individual to read the Megillah."

The Mishnah in *Megillah* 23b, lists many obligations that require a minyan, such as Krias HaTorah. The Gemara there explains that this is derived from the Torah, "*venikdashti besoch bnei Yisrael*" — I will be sanctified among the Jewish people (Vayikra 22:32), which teaches us that all "*devarim she'b'kedusha*" — sanctifications of G-d's name may only be performed among members of klal Yisroel. *Devarim she'b'kedusha* are not obligations on the individual, rather each congregation (*tzibur*) of ten men is obligated to complete these communal responsibilities as a collective unit. Krias haTorah is the obligation of the *tzibur* and thus is an act that can only be performed by a *tzibur*. Therefore, if you miss Krias haTorah, you are not required to make it up. According to the Mordechai, Megillah, although not listed in the Mishnah as a *davar she'b'kedusha*, is

subsumed under Krias HaTorah, and therefore may not be read without a minyan.

However, most Rishonim codify the opinion of Rav that Megillah does not require a minyan. The Rema adds (OC 690:18) that a beracha before the Megillah may be recited at a reading without a minyan. The Ramban proves that Megillah does not require a minyan from the fact that the Mishnah does not list Megillah as a *davar she'b'kedusha*.

And yet, the *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 690:18) recommends that all efforts be extended to read the Megillah with a minyan. According to these Rishonim, Rav agreed that the optimal way to read is with a minyan, and only believed that *b'dieved*, ex post facto, if read privately, one fulfilled the mitzvah. Furthermore, according to most poskim, the beracha following the Megillah is only recited at Megillah readings of ten.

If the role of minyan at Megillah is not required, then Megillah is not a *davar she'b'kedusha*. In that case, what is this unique enhancement to Megillah when read with ten?

Pirsumei Nisa: Marketing the Miracle

A popular explanation for seeking a minyan for Megillah is based on the comments of the Ramban (*Milchamos HaShem*, Megillah 3a). The Ramban suggests that in the cases of the *devarim she'b'kedusha* listed in the Mishnah, such as Krias haTorah, there is no personal obligation on any individual. Rather each *tzibur* of ten men is obligated to complete these communal responsibilities as a collective unit. In contrast, reading the Megillah is a personal obligation

that each Jew must fulfill. The goal of reading the Megillah is *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle. Educating ourselves individually about the Megillah is considered a sufficient fulfillment of *pirsumei nisa*. However, the bigger the audience, the greater the *pirsumei nisa*. According to this approach, the recommendation of an audience of ten relates to how information is most effectively publicized. The Gemara in *Kesubos* (7b) relates that when Boaz wanted to spread the newly derived laws permitting marrying Moabite women, he was advised to communicate the ruling to ten people. Ten individuals represent the critical mass that enables information to effectively become public.

Based on this unique role of minyan for Megillah, poskim suggest many differences between the minyan of Megillah and the minyan of *davar she'b'kedusha*. According to most poskim, women, who cannot make up a minyan for *devarim she'b'kedusha*, can make up the minyan for Megillah (see Rema OC 690:15). The reason that women are counted only for the minyan of Megillah is that women, as an audience, are no different than men. For *davar she'b'kedusha*, a sleeping man may count toward a minyan. However, a sleeping person cannot be counted for Megillah, because the miracles are not publicized during their nap. Those who have been excommunicated cannot count toward a minyan for *davar she'b'kedusha*, since it is reserved for members of the community. However, they may be counted for a minyan of Megillah, because the miracles are still being publicized.

For *davar she'b'kedusha*, we can't always count those who have already

discharged their obligation. However, Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (*Mikraei Kodesh* 50) argues that if one person still has not read Megillah, he may read in front of nine others who have already fulfilled their obligation, and he is considered to have read the Megillah with a minyan. This is because the minyan for Megillah is a personal reading whose goal is to spread the miracles to a large audience. Marketers often repeat the same message to further and deepen their message.

Geographic Location

How close do the ten people need to be to each other in order to combine to form a minyan? The Bavli (*Berachos* 50b) says that two groups who eat in the same house and can see each other form a *zimun* of ten. Tosafos quotes from the Yerushalmi that even if they are in two houses, as long as the groups can see each other and hear the benching, they may combine. The Rashba in a teshuva (1:96) posits the possibility that this same criteria applies to all *devarim she'b'kedusha*. Based on this, the *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 55:14) quotes from the *Orchos Chaim* that someone standing outside the shul is part of a minyan as long as the following conditions are met: he can see some of the people in the shul, they can see him, and he can hear the chazan. The *Mishnah Berurah* 55:52, decides that it is ideal not to rely on this ruling unless absolutely necessary.

Can we infer from the ruling of the *Shulchan Aruch* that ten people hearing the Megillah via video-conference can form a minyan? The *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 55:13) also says that the minyan for a *davar she'b'kedusha* must be in the same

physical location — “*bemakom echad*.” If the *Shulchan Aruch* requires everyone to be in the same location, why does the *Shulchan Aruch* include those outside the shul? The most logical understanding is that while all ten must be in one location, for the purposes of *davar she'b'kedusha*, one location is defined as those who can see/hear each other, even if they are outside of the room. However, those who are clearly in different locations, despite the fact that technological advances allow video-conference participants to see and hear, could not combine to form a minyan.

However, *Shulchan Aruch* (OC 55:13) rules that if someone can hear the chazan, regardless of how far he is from the chazan, he can answer and respond to *devarim she'b'kedusha*. This is based on the opinion of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi (*Pesachim* 85b) that “there is no iron wall that can blockade the Jewish People from Hashem.” The commentators debate whether this only permits the person far away to **respond** to *devarim she'b'kedusha*, or whether he is actually part of the minyan.

With regard to the geographic location of the minyan for Megillah, the Gemara (*RH* 27b) states that someone listening to the Megillah outside the shul has fulfilled his responsibility of Megillah with a minyan. The Ritva writes, “to combine for a *davar she'b'kedusha*, we require one domain ... but anything that does not require ten, such as shofar and Megillah, one fulfills the obligation even if not in the same domain.” Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank (op. cit) argues that there is no requirement that all ten people be located in the same physical location to form the minyan of Megillah. Perhaps, according to the Ritva and Rav Frank, combining

ten via video-conferencing would be considered a valid minyan for Megillah.

However, *Birchas Refael*, Purim no. 51, quoting the Ran, argues that the Gemara refers only to a case where there are ten people in the shul, and the one standing outside is the eleventh man. Even though for a *davar she'b'kedusha* one can only fulfill the mitzvah in the location of the minyan, the need for ten differs with regard to Megillah. As long as there is a group of ten who are in the same location, the mitzvah of *pirsumei nisa* has been fulfilled, and anyone else who can hear that reading is participating in the enhanced *pirsumei nisa*.

These Rishonim, although they equate forming a minyan for *pirsumei nisa* and Megillah, seem to be suggesting the following major difference: in order to be a full-fledged member of the minyan for *pirsumei nisa*, a person might need to be in the same room as ten others. However, with regard to Megillah, as long as the chazzan is in a location with ten, everyone else who can see and hear, perhaps even via video-conferencing, despite being in a different physical location, are part of the minyan.

Furthermore, it could be suggested that not only *can* the Megillah be read publicly in this way, but the community *should* provide a Megillah-reading via video-conference. This would afford those individuals who are unable to attend a minyan to hear the Megillah with a minyan. In addition, we can debate whether it would be a “super *pirsumei nisa*” if all the Jews in the entire world (or in a particular time zone) would combine via video-conference to form one global Megillah reading. [This assumes the position that hearing the

Megillah through a digital medium is a valid form of hearing the Megillah.]

Megillah as Model for the Power of Technology

Considering that a video-conference of the Megillah might lead to a “super *pirsumei nisa*” highlighted for me that we must work to expand the ways in which technology can spread Torah to all Jews across the world. Most Orthodox discussions about internet and technology center on extremely important areas of concern, such as access to inappropriate material, the waste of time and loss of focus. Our Rabbis teach us that all great weapons of destruction were placed in the world because they have much greater powers to do good. I believe that Hashem has placed us in a generation of such great technological tools with the expectation and challenge that we spread and enhance the messages of the Torah in ways never fathomable to previous generations. Hashem has afforded our generation this nuclear Torah weapon in order to increase knowledge and honor of G-d the world over, and we have only scratched the surface of its potential power. Certainly the existence of numerous Torah websites and apps, Skype shiurim, and shiur banks highlights our successes. But if a popular music video can have 4.7 billion views on YouTube, then it is clearly within our communal power to spread Torah to the entire world. It should be our mission to use the technological tools to do no less than publicize G-d’s miracles to all of the land and to hear every Jew and all of the world’s children proclaim “HaShem Melech.”

How the Mitzvot of Purim Unmask Us

Every year on Purim we encounter a halacha that confuses and confounds us, and for many, offends our sensibilities. The joy of Purim can be hampered by the dread of pervasive drunkenness that, if done incorrectly, can change the mood of Purim from *simcha shel mitzvah* to *simcha shel holelut* (an empty, selfish exuberance). My goal in this article is not to present a halachic analysis of the concept of drinking on Purim, but a hashkafic approach to this mitzvah, as well as its limitations.

Truth be told, it is bizarre to have a mitzvah that promotes drunkenness, since as a whole it is considered to be an unsavory, if not outright prohibited, behavior.

As the Rambam writes in *Hilchos Deot* 5:3:

וכל המשתכר הרי זה חוטא ומגונה ומפסיד חכמתו, ואם נשתכר בפני עמי הארץ הרי זה חילל את השם.

Anyone who gets drunk is a sinner, is repulsive and causes himself to lose his wisdom. If one gets drunk in front of the masses, then it is a desecration of Hashem's name.

When discussing the idea of getting drunk on Purim, Rabbi Yosef Karo in the *Beit Yosef, Orach Chaim* no. 695, puts it in even stronger terms:

חייב אינו לבסומי בפוריא לא שישתכר שהשיכרות איסור גמור ואין לך עבירה גדולה



Rabbi Joshua Strulowitz

Judaic Studies Faculty

YU High School for Girls, Holliswood, NY

מזו שהוא גורם לגילוי עריות ושפיכות דמים וכמה עבירות זולתן.

*"One is obligated to get intoxicated on Purim": This does not mean to actually get drunk, because becoming intoxicated is completely prohibited and **there is no greater sin than that**. It causes sexual immorality, murder and many other sins.*

CENTRAL
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The concerns about intoxication are not trivial. They are written in stark and alarming language. How then could it not only be allowed, but become a mitzvah one day out of the year?

Rav Moshe Isserles, in his gloss on the *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 695:2, attempts to find a happy medium when he writes:

ואחד המרבה ואחד הממעט, ובלבד שיכוין לבו לשמים.

Whether one drinks a little more than usual or a lot more, it is vital that his intention only be for the sake of Heaven.

While the Rama is sending the message that abusing alcohol for illicit reasons is not a mitzvah, how can there be an action that is a mitzvah if done with the

correct intentions, but a severe sin if done for the incorrect reasons?

In an attempt to better understand this concept, let's look at an oft-quoted Gemara in *Eruvin* 65b (translation is based on Rashi):

בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר: בכוסו, ובכיסו, ובכעסו.

In regards to three things we can tell the quality of someone's character: How he handles himself when drunk, if he acts honestly in his financial dealings, and if he is excessively harsh in his anger.

These three elements are a window into the soul, showing a person's true nature. We are often skilled at putting on a good face and showing our best selves to the world, but once intoxication, money or anger are involved, the real person emerges from behind the mask.

In that vein, it speaks to a prominent theme of Purim: the true face emerging from behind a masked identity. In fact, we see the true form of many characters in Megillat Esther by their interaction with *koso*, *kiso* and *ka'aso*.

Koso (Intoxication)

The first element is intoxication, which plays a major part of the Purim story. The entire episode begins with the following verse in Esther 1:10:

בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי כְּטוֹב לֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ בֵּין אָמֵר לְמַהוּמָן ...

On the seventh day, when the King's heart was merry with wine, he said to Mehuman...

The story of Purim really begins with Achashverosh's demand for Vashti to parade herself in front of a large crowd, and her refusal to do so. Why was his intoxication a necessary component of the story? The Gemara, in *Megillah* 12b, explains that in Achashverosh's drunkenness, his conversation devolved into vulgarity, which ultimately led to him bragging about his wife's beauty and attempting to drag her out in front of the masses to showcase his prize. His intoxication brought out his essence, and it was not flattering.

The Gemara's description is very telling:

שִׁישְׂרָאֵל אוֹכְלִין וְשׁוֹתִין, מִתְחִילִין בְּדַבְּרֵי תוֹרָה וּבְדַבְּרֵי תִשְׁבָּחוֹת. אֲבָל אוֹמוֹת הָעוֹלָם שְׂאוֹכְלִין וְשׁוֹתִין - אֵין מִתְחִילִין אֵלָא בְּדַבְּרֵי תִפְלוּת.

When Jews eat and drink, they begin with words of Torah and praise to Hashem. However, when the nations of the world eat and drink — they begin with words of immorality.

This contrast between how Jews and non-Jews behave in celebration can serve as a model to understanding our central question. On Purim, we demonstrate our essence, and contrast it with the essence of Haman and Achashverosh. In the *Megillah* (9:22) we learn of three quintessential mitzvot of the day: *mishloach manot*

(sending of gifts), *matanot la'evyonim* (charity), and *mishteh* (feasting).

Each of these mitzvot shows that every Jew's goal is to act exactly the opposite of Haman and Achashverosh. The idea of getting drunk on Purim is to show our true essence, and that it is different than Achashverosh's. However, as the Rama says, if one does not do so for the sake of Heaven, then not only has he not fulfilled any mitzvah, he has demonstrated that he is no better than Achashverosh.

Kiso (Money)

As Haman makes his case to destroy the Jews, he offers 10,000 silver talents to sweeten the pot (Esther 3:9). It is unclear if Achashverosh accepts the offer (3:11), but Mordechai does reference the monetary amount (4:7) and Esther tells Achashverosh that her people were "sold" (7:4), which may indicate that Achashverosh did in fact accept the bribe. Many assume that the reason Haman felt the need to offer money was to offset Achashverosh's concern that if the Jewish people were killed, he would lose their tax revenue.

The repulsive idea that money was a primary factor in the decision to commit genocide highlights the importance that Haman and Achashverosh placed on money. In contrast, the mitzvah of *matanot la'evyonim* is meant to show our relationship to money. In fact, the *Shulchan Aruch* writes (*Orach Chaim* 694:3) that we should give freely on Purim, and that we should give to any and all who ask for *tzedakah*. We are showing our essence in how we behave with our money, and that it is the exact opposite of the greed of Haman and Achashverosh.

Ka'aso (Anger)

The *Megillah* 3:5 makes it clear that Haman's downfall begins with his anger:

וַיֵּרָא הָמָן כִּי אֵין מֵרְדֵּכָי כָּרַע וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לּוֹ וַיִּמְלֵא הָמָן חֲמָה.

And Haman saw that Mordechai did not bow down to him and he became filled with rage.

Haman was the second most powerful person in the world. The ruler of the largest empire the world had ever seen relied on him for advice. Why couldn't he overlook a perceived slight from an ordinary citizen? Why did he decide to make all-out war with Mordechai's nation when they posed no threat to him or the empire?

Because Haman, to his core, was a petty, bitter and vindictive man. His anger consumed him to the point that it was all he could focus on. As the Gemara, *Megillah* 19a, explains, Haman became obsessed with the Jews because of Mordechai's refusal to bow to him, and this obsession resulted in his and his family's demise. Clearly, Haman's true colors are revealed from his anger.

On Purim we do the opposite. We give *mishloach manot*, gifts of food to one another. Instead of relating to each with anger jealousy and conflict, we promote peace and unity with gifts and show that we are the exact opposite of Haman.

Ultimately, our goal on Purim is to unmask our true souls and show the purity we hold within. May we always approach Purim with that mentality and allow it to define our Purim celebrations.

Living in a Walled City

The opening Mishnah in *Tractate Megillah* teaches us that the Megillah is read on different days depending on one's location. Those who reside within a walled city from the time of Yehoshua bin Nun read the Megillah on the fifteenth day of Adar, while those who live in all other cities (except for Shushan) read the Megillah on the fourteenth day of Adar. The Ramban, *Megillah* 2a, is very puzzled by these unique laws. We never find that one particular mitzvah has two different time frames within which to fulfill the mitzvah. If the Torah itself never calls for such a distinction, why should a rabbinic holiday such as the festival of Purim allow for any deviance? Furthermore, the Talmud in *Tractate Yevamot* 14a, derives from the words "Lo Titgodedu" (Deuteronomy 14), that we should not allow the practice of noticeably different halachic customs, lest it give the appearance of there being two Torahs. Yet the Talmud is very clear that the Megillah is read on two very different occasions; why does this particular mitzvah require two time periods?

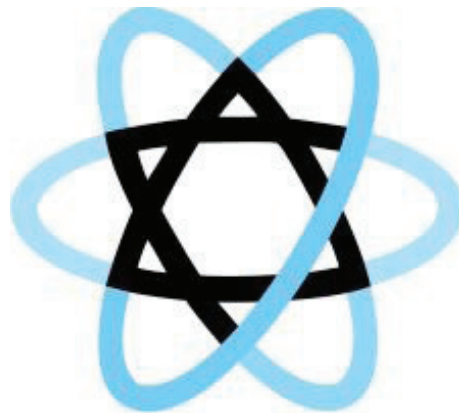
The Ramban suggests several approaches to understanding this unique halachah. In one explanation, he explains that the Jews of the walled cities did not fear impending violence because they felt safe and protected in their towns. Only the inhabitants of the unwalled cities felt the dangers of being exposed and open to foreign invasion. These people, who survived the potential



Rabbi Meir Tannenbaum

Judaic Studies Principal,
Yavneh Academy, Dallas, TX

onslaught on the thirteenth day of Adar, understood that they had just witnessed an incredible miracle and recognized the need to celebrate on the fourteenth. However, those in the walled cities, who were unafraid from the very onset of the original public announcement, were not convinced that they needed to celebrate until Mordechai and his court ordered the enactment of the festival for them as well. Because they were unafraid of any danger, their festival remains secondary to those in the unwalled cities, and therefore is not observed until the following day, the fifteenth day of Adar.



YAVNEH
ACADEMY

The Ran, *Megillah* 1a, questions the Ramban's assertion that the walled cities did not experience the same miracle as those in the unwalled cities. He rightfully claims that the wall would only have provided protection from any outside invaders, but what protection would a wall have provided against the dangers from within their own city? Certainly, there was a risk from inside their own cities from their very own neighbors and fellow residents. These Jews could very easily have been murdered by their neighbors within the walled cities. There was no less danger to the residents of the walled cities than to those of the unwalled cities. They too should be observing Purim on the fourteenth day — why should there be any distinction between walled and unwalled cities?

Perhaps the answer to the Ran's question lies in a sad statement of Jewish reality. The Jews within the walled cities certainly should have feared the dangers from within their walls as much as from outside their walls. Yet the reality is they did not. They felt safe and protected by their neighbors and gentile friends. They never envisioned that their very own friends, acquaintances, and colleagues would turn on them and murder

them. However, as history has proven repeatedly, this is pure fantasy, and the tragic fallacy of Anti-Semitism. Far too often we have sought shelter and sanctuary from our non-Jewish neighbors, and far too often they have failed to deliver. From the Inquisition to the Holocaust, the Crusaders to pogroms, the message of “*Al tivtichu b’ndivim*, do not trust in princes” (Psalms 146) rings awfully loud and terribly tragic. The Jews should not have trusted their neighbors and they should have realized the dangers from within the wall, but they did not. They thought they were safe and did not realize the magnitude of the miracle that G-D had performed for them.

The Chiddushei HaRim, R. Yitzchak Meir Alter (the first Gerrer Rebbe, cited in *Siach Sarfei Kodesh* pg. 219), suggests an alternative homiletic interpretation to understand the Ramban. The Rebbe explains that these two different locales don’t refer only to places, but actually to different types of people within the Jewish community. Those that live within the walled cities from the time of Yehoshua refer to those within the Jewish communities who feel secure in their faith and protected by their trust in G-D. These Jews understood that the impending disaster was a result of their willingness to bow down to Haman. The Jews of

the “walled cities” never considered bowing down to a mere mortal like Haman. In their eyes, sacrificing their life for G-D’s honor and dying a martyr’s death was not to be dreaded, but rather eagerly anticipated much like the famous tale of Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom. They never feared sin before and never feared death now. It is only the people of the unwalled cities, those who lacked this impenetrable moral fence and felt no security in their religious beliefs, who felt fear. It is these Jews, who were tempted to placate Haman and acquiesce to his demands in the name of self-preservation, who feared the impending decrees of annihilation. For these Jews of the unwalled cities, their salvation on the thirteenth was cause for immediate celebration on the very next day. However, because the Jews of the walled cities weren’t fearful of sin, nor of dying a martyr’s death, they felt no need to declare a festival and therefore their festival remains secondary and delayed until the fifteenth.

According to this interpretation, it is understandable why a walled city is determined to be walled only if its wall dates back to the time period of Yehoshua bin Nun. At first glance this condition seems to be completely arbitrary; why should the time be determined by Yehoshua’s era over

any other period in history? Is there any connection between Yehoshua and walls? Is he somehow intrinsically related to the festival of Purim? The Rebbe explains that the verse (Shmot 33:11) describes Yehoshua as the young lad who never left the tent. He was the very epitome of “living within the walls.” He was a man who would not and could not have been tempted to worship a mortal. He did not have mortal fears of failure or death, because his life inside his tent was a purely spiritual existence.

Today we live in unwalled cities. While we do not face a constant physical threat, we certainly face a spiritual threat. This danger comes both from within our communities and from the culture and society on the outside. While there is no way to ensure that we and our families will remain safe and secure in these volatile times, we can look to Yehoshua for inspiration. His timeless message to us is to create our own tent and never leave it. A tent is unique in that it allows access to and interactions with the outside world, yet it still provides comfort and security. We can engage with the world around us, yet still remain rooted and protected within the secure and protective walls of our personal religious tents.



The Torah describes Yehoshua as the young lad who never left the tent. He was the very epitome of “living within the walls.”

Loshon Hara You've Got to Hear

The Gemara elaborates on a fateful conversation between Haman and Achashveirosh, in which Haman convinces him to approve his plans to, Heaven forbid, decimate the Jewish People:

אמר רבא ליכא דידע לישנא בישא כהמן אמר ליה תא ניכלינהו אמר ליה מסתפינא מאלקיו דלא ליעביד בי כדעבד בקמאי אמר ליה ישנו מן המצות אמר ליה אית בהו רבנן אמר ליה עם אחד הן.

Rava said: Haman was a most skillful slanderer. Haman said, "Let's destroy them." Achashveirosh said, I am concerned because "Things did not end well for the enemies of Hashem's People in the past." Haman reassured him: "The Jews have been sleeping (yashnu) in respect to their mitzva observance." Achashveirosh said: "But aren't there Sages?!" Haman retorted "Am Echod; they are One People."

Megillah 13b

The *S'fas Emes* ad loc. explains that Haman was indeed correct and accurately understood the essence of the Jewish people. We are collectively responsible for each other. A Jewish people with rabbis observing Torah while the rest of the nation is disengaged is a Jewish people deserving, G-d forbid, of demise.

It is important to note that this was a truly remarkable generation. In addition to Mordechai and Esther, this generation included tzadikim the likes of Daniel, Ezra, Nechemia and Malachi! These are individuals who have entire books of Tanach honoring their accomplishments — singularly righteous individuals after



Rabbi Zacharia Weitz

Upper School Judaics Curriculum Coordinator,
Columbus Torah Academy, Columbus, OH

whom we've named our children for millennia. Yet, because there were components of our nation who were disengaged, Hashem deemed us, *chas v'shalom*, worthy of annihilation.

On a deeper level, the Vilna Gaon (to Esther 1:1, *Remez*) famously tells us that Megillat Esther represents our nation's relationship with Hashem and our struggle with the Evil Inclination. Every place it says the word "*HaMelech*" it refers the Almighty, while the word "*Achashveirosh*" refers to the *Yeitzer Horah*.



With this understanding, the acceptance of Haman's accusation symbolizes something truly colossal; G-d Himself, so to speak, agreed with this piercing criticism of our people. The true mechanics of what could grant the Hamans of history the traction to implement a plan to destroy G-d's People is an accusation

of this nature: "The scholars are thriving, but the laymen are spiritually stagnant."

Whether you are a scholar or a layman, this is a rather staggering prognosis of our situation in Exile and our hopes for redemption. But why is partial disengagement so devastating? Why isn't the presence of thriving sages at least a tolerable state for the Jewish people?

On a practical level, Hashem dispatched every Jewish soul with a unique and vital contribution to the ultimate goal of expressing Hashem's kingdom on earth. Bereft of the collective contributions of most Jews, we have failed to make this world a G-dly place. We are a dull "Light onto the People" and have ultimately failed our purpose.

Perhaps we could share a similar insight to develop the idea. Arguably, the most popular d'var Torah on Sukkot is a midrash, *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:12, that analyzes the four species and the four general categories of Jews they symbolize. From those possessing both Torah and mitzvot — the etrog, down to those possessing neither — the aravot, we grasp all four categories. The message of the midrash is that, through the mitzvah of the four species, Hashem is

conveying to us His desired social and spiritual state of our nation; an *aguda*, a unified team, comprised of these four indispensable elements.

This is one of those feel-good divrei Torah that is welcome at any table, but when taken seriously, this is a daunting expectation. Am I looking for a school specifically with an element of “aravot”? Do I wish they were in my shul? Can I honestly say I celebrate and embrace the presence of those who struggle with Torah and mitzvot the same way I embrace the devout in my community? These are powerful questions.

Truth be told, we do daven to be distanced from bad friends and bad neighbors every day. A careful look at the message of the four species, however, will reconcile this apparent contradiction. With whatever shortcomings these “species” possess, they are showing up to be part of the bundle we call *klal Yisroel*. Perhaps they are aravot but they are interested in unifying with the etrogim among us. The bundling of the four species helps us internalize the goal of unifying the various elements of our Nation. These are the members of our people who, regardless of the caliber of our holy scholars, play an indispensable role in our survival, success and ultimate Redemption.

Engaging Our Am Echod

Personally, as both a parent and an educator, this focuses a more accurate lens on concepts like “differentiation”

and “multiple intelligences.” It is an immense mistake to approach these as “Chumash class” concerns. We have a responsibility to find ways to engage and educate the gamut of *neshamot* in our institutions. This concern is not simply one of academic achievement. Effectively engaging children in Torah and mitzvot enables them to discover the unique role and contribution they were destined to make toward our mission.

There is no shortage of committed and creative parents and educators thinking of ways to introduce more portals of entry into *avodat Hashem*. Here are two suggestions worth considering:

1. Jewish Living Workshops, a program we created at Columbus Torah Academy, invites professionals serving the Jewish community to present workshops explaining what they do. These workshops expose young minds to jobs in kashrut, Hatzalah, eruv, sofrut, Misaskim, etc., and introduce them to the variety of ways they can contribute to the Jewish people. When a teacher is out for the day, why not use the opportunity to show budding adults the many needs and opportunities in your community that they won’t experience in a K-12 education?

2. Navi, more so than any other topic in Torah, allows us to viscerally experience the strengths and shortcomings of dynamic individuals struggling with the gamut of life’s challenges. There are different

approaches to teaching Navi. I passionately believe that helping young minds live the stories, and find creative means to personally express the life lessons inherent in them, is vital to developing a deep, personal and comprehensive connection to *avodat Hashem*. For example, David Hamelech encounters so many crises and hardships and consistently turns these into new ways to connect more deeply to Hashem. Why not have students reflect on a challenge they have encountered and how it can serve as a means to forge a deeper connection — or even write their own “Tehillim” about it? Simplifying Navi to a list of keywords and fill-in-the-blanks will not facilitate these results.

Arur Haman?

Purim, in its fullest, is designed to bring us to the level of seeing no difference between “*baruch Mordechai*” and “*arur Haman*” (*Megillah* 7b). Perhaps this is one of the hidden, (un)intended blessings of Haman’s rhetoric: underneath Haman’s apparent condemnation is a beautiful message. The Jewish People absolutely need every single one of us. Excelling in Torah is fantastic but there is a diverse and indispensable world of needs and roles for every member of the Jewish people beyond the beit medrash. Our existence literally depends on these individuals finding their place in the broader world of Torah, mitzvot and Judaism. Engaging our diverse spectrum of *neshamot* is a vital key to Redemption.

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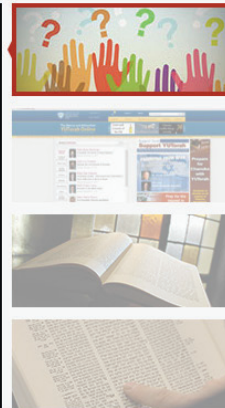
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