

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.



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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.



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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 הִחָרַשׁ תִּחְרָשִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רוּחַ וְהִצְלָה
יַעֲמֹד לַיהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אֲחֵר וְאַתְּ וּבֵית
אָבִיךָ תֵּאבְדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לָעֵת כְּזֹאת הִנָּעַתְּ
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.

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