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Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

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Table of Contents

Purim 2019/5779

Introduction

Rabbi Yaakov Glasser Page 4

Kiyumu V’Kiblu

Mrs. Rachel Besser Page 6

Simchat Purim: Fake it ‘Till You Make it

Rabbi Dov Emerson Page 9

A Significant Lesson from the Oddest of Sources

Rabbi Joseph Blumenthal Page 13

Our Role in the Purim Miracle: Then and Now

Rabbi Daniel Grama Page 15

Jewish Unity

Mrs. Bracha Rutner Page 18

Memuchan is Haman: A Cautionary Tale

Rabbi Menachem Rosenbaum and Rabbi Yitzchak Sprung Page 21

Purim Jokes and Shpiels

Rabbi Noam Stein Page 24



RECOGNIZING HASHEM'S HAND IN OUR LIVES

We find ourselves in a calendar year in which our anticipation to celebrate Purim has been building up for quite some time. To ensure that Pesach is aligned with the spring season, an extra month is sometimes inserted into the calendar year. This extra month gives us an additional month of Adar and so the question arises: In which month should we celebrate Purim? The Gemara, *Megillah* 6b, quotes a dispute between R. Eliezer b. R. Yosi, who holds that we should celebrate Purim in the first Adar, and R. Shimon ben Gamliel, who holds that it should be celebrated in the second Adar. The Gemara explains the two positions as follows:

בשלמא רבי אליעזר ברבי יוסי מסתבר טעמא דאין מעבירין על המצות אלא רשב"ג מ"ט אמר רבי טבי טעמא דרבי שמעון בן גמליאל מסמך גאולה לגאולה עדיף.

We understand R. Eliezer b. R. Yosi's opinion because it is based on the concept that one should not pass over an opportunity to perform a mitzvah. What is R. Shimon ben Gamliel's reasoning? R. Tavi said R. Shimon ben Gamliel's reason is that it is better to connect one redemption (Purim) to another redemption (Pesach).

We follow the opinion of R. Shimon ben Gamliel and observe Purim in the second Adar. Why should the concept of *mismach geulah l'geulah* (connecting one redemption to another

redemption), which seems to be a homiletical idea, take precedence over the universal halachic principle of *ain ma'avirin al hamitzvos* (one should not pass over an opportunity to perform a mitzvah)? Why don't we follow this principle and observe Purim at our very first opportunity, in the first month of Adar? What is it about the desire to create this thematic parallel between Purim and Pesach that supersedes *ain ma'avirin al hamitzvos*, a principle that applies in so many aspects of halachic observance?

Megillas Esther tells the story of Haman's genocidal plan to wipe out the Jewish people and its ultimate salvation through the heroic acts of

The educators of our adolescents face an enormous challenge in trying to help our youth see the hand of Hashem in a world where His presence is not always so obvious. These heroic leaders dedicate themselves to helping our teens realize that He is always there.

Mordechai and Esther. We can easily read this story as one of two proactive, smart Jewish leaders who successfully advocate for the Jewish people and their cause. The salvation came about because of their creativity and political advocacy. We can look at it this way because the name of Hashem does not appear once throughout the Megillah. The message of Megillas Esther is that we can choose to live our lives thinking that the events that take place in our lives are products of the decisions that we make, the opportunities we encounter and the circumstances that evolve. We can choose not to recognize the hand of Hashem in our daily lives. Yet we know that if we read the Megillah without recognizing Hashem's hand every step along the way, we would be missing the main point of the Megillah. Do we “read” our own

lives the same way? Are we able to recognize the hand of Hashem in those small “coincidences” that shape our lives?

The message of *mismach geulah* *l'geulah* is that the events where Hashem works behind the scenes are just as grandiose as the miracles that took place when Hashem took us out of Egypt. The Purim story is just as much a story of Hashem's great miracles as the Pesach story where Hashem's hand is so overt and clear. We have to recognize that we live in Purim-like times. It is rare for us to see Hashem's hand in an overt way. There have been instances — such as the birth of the State of Israel and the Six-Day War — where His hand is more easily recognizable, but it is harder to see His overt hand in our daily lives. The story of Purim teaches us that Hashem is actively involved in shaping Jewish history and our lives.

At the end of the Megillah (9:31), we read:

לְקִים אֶת יְמֵי הַפְּרִים הָאֵלֶּה בְּזִמְנֵיהֶם כְּאֲשֶׁר
קִים עֲלֵיהֶם מֶרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי וְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה
וְכְאֲשֶׁר קִיְּמוּ עַל נַפְשָׁם וְעַל זִרְעָם דְּבָרֵי הַצְּמֹת
וְהַעֲקָתָם.

These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordechai the Jew — and now Queen Esther — has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations.

What does the Megillah mean by “the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations”? What does fasting, which took place before the

Purim miracle, have to do with the celebration of Purim? R. Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg, *Kisvei HaRav Weinberg* (Vol. II pg. 195), suggests that recognizing Hashem's role in the Purim story is an integral part of the Purim story, and the that the fasts and prayers, which took place at the turning point in the story, were the impetus for Hashem's intervention. To properly celebrate Purim, we must remember the role of these actions.

This issue of *Torah To-Go* is a partnership between several yeshiva high schools and Yeshiva University. The leaders and educators of our adolescents face an enormous challenge in trying to help our youth see the hand of Hashem in a world where His presence is not always so obvious. They are competing with a society where everything is about personal needs, personal autonomy and technology and where little attention is paid to Hashem's role in our destiny or in our daily lives. These heroic leaders and educators dedicate themselves to helping our teens connect to Hashem and realize that He is always there. This is a daunting challenge and we should recognize their efforts.

We too, as community members, parents, grandparents and friends, can play an important role in this endeavor. We can make spirituality and connectedness a common part of our world. We can create environments, homes and spaces where finding Hashem is something that resonates as a profound part of our lives.



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KIMU V'KIBLU

In discussing a particular linguistic nuance of the story of the giving of the Torah, which seems to say that the Jews stood under the mountain of Sinai, the Gemara in *Shabbat* 88a, raises an essential question about the nature of Matan Torah itself:

ויתיצבו בתחתית ההר א"ר אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא מלמד שכפה הקב"ה עליהם את ההר כגיגית ואמר להם אם אתם מקבלים התורה מוטב ואם לאו שם תהא קבורתכם א"ר אחא בר יעקב מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא.

"They stood at the bottom of the mountain." Rav Avdimi bar Chama bar Chasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, covered them with the mountain like an [overturned] vat. And He said to them, "If you accept the Torah, good. And if not, there will be your burial." Rav Acha bar Yaakov said, from here is a strong signal [of coercion] regarding [acceptance of] the Torah.

In order to explain a troubling verse, the Gemara ends up raising the

possibility that despite the Jews' exclamation of *"naaseh v'nishmah"* — we will do and we will listen (Exodus 24:7) — the Jews actually had no choice but to accept the Torah and keep all of its doctrines. Rashi notes that because of the coercion, the Jews can later claim that they cannot be held responsible for breaking the law; for the acceptance itself was tainted.



To address this more difficult problem, the Gemara quotes a second verse, this one from Megillat Esther:

אמר רבא אעפ"כ הדור קבלוה בימי אחשוורוש דכתיב (אסתר ט, כז) קימו וקבלו היהודים קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר

Rava said: Nevertheless, they accepted it again in the days of Achashverosh, as it is written (Esther 9:27), "The Jews established and accepted" — they established [in the days of Achashverosh] what they had already accepted [in the days of Moshe].

Despite the literary parallelism of *kimu v'kiblu* to *na'aseh v'nishma*, the verse in Esther seems a strange choice. The acceptance at the time of Esther seems limited to the holiday of Purim, not a broader re-acceptance of all of the mitzvot. Furthermore, if Chazal were looking for post-Sinaitic acceptance of the Torah, two prime examples come to mind. One occurs in 2 Kings 23, when King Yoshiyahu, after finding a sefer Torah hidden in the Beit Hamikdash, makes a covenant with the people that they will keep the laws and edicts written in the Torah. In fact, the specific language used there calls the Torah a *sefer ha-brit* — book of the covenant

(2 Kings 23:2), while earlier it is called just *sefer* or *sefer Ha-Torah* (2 Kings 22:8, 10-11, 16). The shift in the language not only emphasizes the covenantal nature of the acceptance of the Torah, it parallels the verse where the Jews originally acquiesced to keeping the Torah:

וַיִּקַּח סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית וַיִּקְרָא בְּאָזְנוֹ הָעָם וַיֹּאמְרוּ כֹל
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע.

Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do."

A second example occurs in Nehemiah 8 when Ezra brings out the *sefer Torah* and reads it to the people. The people of the Second Temple listen to the Torah and the text points out that Ezra read it *meforash* — in a way that they could understand (Nehemiah 8:8). Both these instances seem better candidates for a second acceptance of the Torah that would not carry the deficiencies of the first. Yoshiyahu is not holding a mountain over the heads of the people and they nevertheless make a covenant with him to accept the Torah,¹ and Ezra makes sure that everyone understands the Torah before they accept its strictures. Both of these stories focus on a large group of people who are exposed to the whole Torah, not one specific part, and who accept upon themselves to carry out its mission. In contrast, the source in Esther seems small and insignificant. After reading the verse in Esther we do not even know if the Jews are committed to keeping any of the other mitzvot.

Perhaps what defines the Torah acceptance of the story of Esther is its location — it occurs in the *galut* — a specific place with a specific purpose. In order to understand the structure and purpose of *galut* we look to Yirmiyahu, a few generations earlier, who discusses the nature of *galut* in his letter to the exiles of Babylonia before the destruction, during the reign of King Yehoyachin (Jeremiah 29). These Jewish exiles were depressed and forlorn. They missed their old lives in Judea and especially missed the service in the Beit Hamikdash, where they felt a spiritual connection to God. Yirmiyahu tells the people that this exile will not be harsh — they will have houses, gardens, children and generations — however, their relationship with God will have to shift. Instead of the miracles present in the Temple, they will have to seek God out on their own (Jeremiah 29:12). Instead of the pillar of fire descending from the heavens to signify that God accepted their sacrifice, they will have to turn to prayer, without knowing whether God acquiesced to their requests or not. Instead of the life of Israel which is described as a land where “the eyes of the Lord are always upon it” (Deuteronomy 11:12), Yirmiyahu tells the people:

וַדְרֹשׁוּ אֶת שְׁלוֹם הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר הִגְלִיתִי אֶתְכֶם
שָׁמָּה וְהִתְפַּלְלוּ בְּעֵדָה אֵלַי ה' כִּי בְשָׁלוֹמָהּ יִהְיֶה
לָכֶם שְׁלוֹם.

And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

Jeremiah 29:7

How jarring it must have sounded to the Jews to hear that instead of praying for Jerusalem, now they must pray for their host city, signifying that the particularistic relationship they were used to in Israel was no longer, and their lot will be thrown in with the Babylonians.

Yirmiyahu teaches the people that *galut* is a training ground. They had abused the relationship they had with God in which He shows His face, assuring them of His presence through miracles and the rituals of the Beit Hamikdash. They need to use *galut* to reestablish the relationship through turning to God even when His presence is not apparent.

The *Meshech Chochmah*, in explaining how Hashem held the mountain over their heads, writes:

פִּירוּשׁ שֶׁהָרָאָה לָהֶם כְּבוֹד ה' בַּהֲקִיץ
וּבַהֲתַגְלוֹת נִפְלְאָה עַד כִּי מִמֶּנּוּ בִטְלָה בְּחִירָתָם
הַטְּבִיעִי.

Meaning that God showed them His glory while they were in an awakened state, and He did so in a spectacularly revealing manner to the point where their natural free will was quashed.

Meshech Chochmah, Shemot 19:17

God did not literally hold a mountain over the heads of the Jewish people but rather revealed His presence to such an extent that it was impossible to deny, thereby removing their free will in accepting the Torah.

What better time to reinstate the free will of the Jews than the holiday of Purim, one which occurs in the very *galut* that Yirmiyahu described as a training ground for re-acceptance of



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God's sovereignty? The story of the Megillah itself follows this formula exactly. Yirmiyahu noted that one of the markers of *galut* is that the lot of the Jews will be thrown in with that of their host country. Perhaps this can explain the purpose of the first chapter of the Megillah. At first glance, the chapter detailing the decadent parties that Achashverosh throws for his officers and the people of Shushan, complete with detailed descriptions of the palace, the drunkenness and Achashverosh's own paranoia and misogyny, has no place in the story of the Jewish people. It would have perhaps been more logical to begin the Megillah with the introduction of the main Jewish characters — Mordechai and Esther, who only appear in chapter two, or the antagonist, Haman, who only appears in chapter three. With the backdrop of the meaning of the *galut*, however, chapter one, detailing the actions of a king who rules by his moods and kills to preserve his self-image is vitally important, detailing as it does the political climate that the Jews must navigate in order to survive.² Chapter one serves a vital purpose in the story, because it reveals that the Jewish people at the time of the Megillah are in a terrible state, with their fate in the hands of an unstable and dangerous despot.³ The importance of the unstable position of the Jews may also explain one of the opinions in the Gemara (*Megillah* 19a) in discussing how much of the Megillah we must read on the night of Purim. This opinion holds that we must read the entire Megillah — from the beginning of the story of Achashverosh's parties. Rav Soloveitchik explains that the reasoning behind this opinion is that, "The Megillah is not just the story of triumph; it is also a book of despair,

of human insecurity — particularly Jewish insecurity and instability."⁴

It is from this place of insecurity and instability that the Jews are truly able to accept the Torah. They turn to God in the story of Purim not because God's miracles are manifest, not because God's presence is clear, and not even in their own land with a Jewish king or governor ruling over them. Rather the Torah acceptance of Purim is a vital addition to the earlier one because it happens in the shadow of the palace of Shushan, which may be friendly to the Jews one minute but may kill them the next. While

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the stories of Yoshiyahu and Ezra/ Nehemiah happen in times that were politically unstable,⁵ and in Ezra's case, where God's presence was not as clear as it was in earlier times, it is only in the story of Purim that the Jews reach the depths of despair and insecurity. The political climate of Purim is a perfect example of Yirmiyahu's dictate — in *galut*, the fate of the Jews will be dictated by the whims of a culture alien to their own and possibly by the whims of a volatile king. It is from this tense political situation that the Jews must follow Yirmiyahu's advice — they must seek out God and pray to Him. They must remember who they are and where they come from,

and only then can they once again earn the direct connection with God that they merited during the time of the First Beit Hamikdash. When the Jews do this and establish a holiday to remember their salvation, they truly accept God's sovereignty unforced, without a barrel or anything else held over their heads.

Endnotes

1. In *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, Michael Walzer notes that in case of Yoshiyahu, "The book had to be accepted because it was about to be enforced — indeed rigorously enforced at considerable cost to some members of the community." (10)
2. Yoram Hazony develops this thesis in *God and Politics in Esther*, noting that "the book of Esther deals first and foremost with the problem of a Jewish politics in exile: how the Jews, deprived of every sovereign institution of power, may nevertheless participate in, and in the last resort make use of, the authority of an alien government to ensure their own vital interests, and in this case, their lives." (3)
3. There are various other interpretations of the purpose of chapter one of the Megillah. The Gemara *Megillah* 12a, for example, offers the opinion of R. Shimon Bar Yochai's students who commented that the reason for the decree of Haman was that the Jews themselves partook in Achashveirosh's party. In *Shir HaShirim Rabbah* 7, it is R. Shimon Bar Yochai who holds that the Jews were punished for eating non-kosher food, seemingly at the party of Achashveirosh.
4. *Days of Deliverance*, 103.
5. Furthermore, in the Ramban's commentary on *Shabbat* 88a, he explains that the reason the Jews had to do mitzvot between Matan Torah and Purim, even though the acceptance of the Torah was coerced, was that they were living in Israel. According to the Ramban, living in Israel itself binds the Jews to keep the mitzvot. This is a further reason that the story of Purim, which occurred in *galut*, would be a less coerced acceptance of the Torah than the two stories of Yoshiyahu and Ezra.



SIMCHAT PURIM: FAKE IT 'TILL YOU MAKE IT

רבה ורבי זירא עבדו סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי איבסום קם רבה שחטיה לרבי זירא למחר בעי רחמי ואחייה לשנה אמר ליה ניתי מר ונעביד סעודת פורים בהדי הדדי אמר ליה לא בכל שעתא ושעתא מתרחיש ניסא.

Rabbah and Rabbi Zeira held the festive Purim meal together. They got drunk, and Rabbah “killed” Rabbi Zeira. The next day Rabbah prayed for Rabbi Zeira, and he was revitalized. The next year, Rabbah said to him: “Let us hold the festive Purim meal together.” Rabbi Zeira said to him: “Miracles do not occur every hour.”

Megillah 7b

One of the hallmarks of Purim is intense physical celebration. There is no other Jewish holiday that comes so close to encouraging adherents to “party” to excess. There is even a directive in



the Talmud for a man to become so “inebriated on Purim that he cannot distinguish between ‘cursed be Haman’ and ‘blessed be Mordecai.’”¹ The Rambam specifies that the Purim festive meal must include the consumption of meat and to “drink wine until he gets drunk and falls into a drunken sleep.”² While the poskim³ discourage actual drunkenness, the concept of drinking wine influences the nature of how we celebrate, even

while we remain sober.

When we think about a celebratory holiday that most epitomizes simcha, or rejoicing, Purim seems to be the obvious choice. It is interesting to note, however, that simcha is a major component of the *Shalosh Regalim*,⁴ and yet the type of joy differs markedly from the wildness of Purim. The Rambam specifically cautions against making our Yom Tov celebration too “Purim-like”:

כשאדם אוכל ושותה ושמח ברגל לא ימשך בין ובשחוק וקלות ראש ויאמר שכל מי שיוסיף בזה ירבה במצות שמחה ... ואי אפשר לעבוד את השם לא מתוך שחוק ולא מתוך קלות ראש ולא מתוך שכרות.

“When one eats and drinks and rejoices on the festivals, he must not overindulge in wine, in frivolity, or in

lightheadedness, saying that whoever intensified these activities intensified the mitzvah of simcha, happiness ... it is impossible to serve G-d through frivolity, lightheadedness, or drunkenness."

Hilchot Yom Tov 6:20

Rav Soloveitchik: "Fake It 'till You Make It" Simcha

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik⁵ notes this comment of the Rambam and the seeming contradiction between the expected behaviors on Purim and the *Shalosh Regalim*. The Rav explains that there are in fact two different types of simcha that manifest themselves in the cycle of the Jewish year. The simcha of the *Shalosh Regalim* celebrates the deep connection that we are privileged to have with our Creator. This type of simcha is "a quiet, meditative experience,"⁶ a focus on an inner feeling, in which the physical acts of celebration are encouraged as a means of achieving an enhanced level of unity with Hashem. Our Yom Tov goals should be in the realm of *cheshbon hanefesh*, a personal

accounting regarding our spiritual progress on this earth. This joy is a "deep-seated *experience* of joy, which expresses itself in a state of being, an existential awareness. The awareness of joy is awareness that our existence has a purpose, that there is self-fulfillment and commitment to a great objective. There is meaning to life."⁷

What, then, is the simcha associated with Purim? The Rav explains that the happiness of Purim is a completely external one. He introduces it in almost negative terms:

*It has nothing to do with a feeling of tranquility, serenity, or peace of mind. It is not an inner experience. It is more active — as if I were happy. Sometimes we see people acting as if they are happy, but it is a false sense. People try to deceive themselves and deceive others and somehow give the impression as if they were happy, while they are in fact very unhappy and depressed. And this concept of happiness was introduced for Purim.*⁸

In the Rav's construct, the *simcha* of Purim is notably fake, or at least

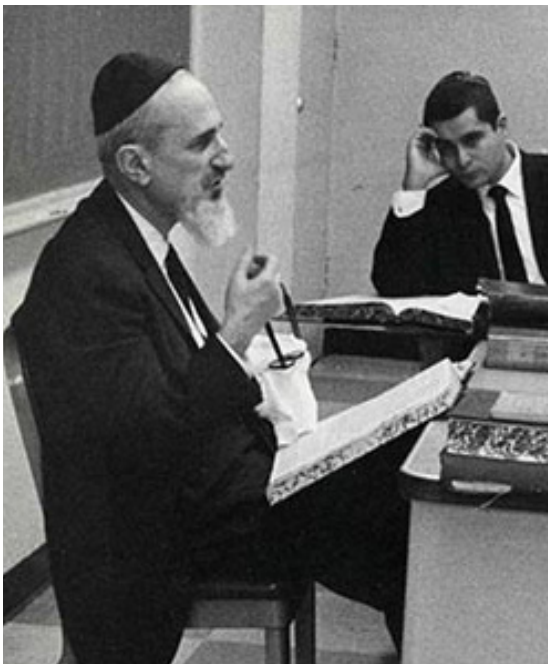
shallow. It is not the "You shall rejoice before the Lord your G-d"⁹ of the *Shalosh Regalim*. The joy of Purim is not the experience of existential awareness that is the Yom Tov, but rather the production of a mood or an emotion. It is a joy that does not emphasize the "*lifnei Hashem*" of the Yom Tov experience.

Why is this so? Rav Soloveitchik explains that Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot all commemorate aspects of a permanent change that our nation experienced. Pesach celebrates our ancestors' transition from slaves to free people, Shavuot recalls our becoming bound in an eternal covenant with G-d, and finally, Sukkot highlights the further change of the people as they adopted the manner and mindset of the great nation that was our destiny.

Purim, on the other hand, represents instability. The Gemara explains why no Hallel is recited on Purim:

הללו עבדי ה' ולא עבדי אחשורוש אכתי עבדי
אחשורוש אנן

Can we say "Praise, O servants of the



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Lord,” who are no longer servants of Achashveirosh? We are still the servants of Achashveirosh.

Megillah 14a

The story of Purim is marked by uncertainty. There is famously no reference to G-d's name in the Megillah. The story of Purim follows a king who can't make up his mind, and responds impulsively to the suggestions of his advisors — be it to kill Vashti, issue Haman's decree against the Jews, or even to kill Haman at the request of Esther. At the conclusion of the story, the Jews still find themselves under the rule of an unpredictable monarch. As Rav Soloveitchik writes:

There was no sense of security. The miracle was incomplete. There was hatzalah, salvation, but no ge'ulah, redemption ... What happened on Purim was not of a permanent nature. They were saved, of course. However, no one could guarantee that the next day the same story would not repeat itself. That is why there is no Hallel.¹⁰

In an environment marked by lack of clarity, where we are unsure of our status and standing, where we wonder aloud if “never again” really means never, we cannot experience the type of joy marked by the sense of purpose, closeness, and contentment we feel on the *Regalim*. This is why we celebrate the miracle on a purely external level. When we do not feel joy internally, we must compensate by acting superficially joyful. This is the unique type of simcha that is the hallmark of Purim. The “as if I were happy” celebration of Purim manifests itself in the drinking and eating we are obligated to do, as well as in the identity-altering costumes and plays of the day. Things are not what they seem because we are recognizing that the salvation, while certainly

from Hashem, is not complete: “The victory is not final; the triumph is not decisive; a repetition is possible. That is why we cannot equate the celebration of Purim with *simchat ha-regel*, the joy of the Festival.”¹¹

Educational Implications: An Action Approach to Chinuch

Inherent in the Rav's approach to *simchat Purim* is the surprising importance of actions and rituals, even when they don't seem to fit the circumstances. We generally try to “read the room,” understand the prevailing mood, and then act accordingly. Here that mood is dark, and exile and uncertainty are the prevailing themes. If we are trying to inspire ourselves and our children to embrace the simcha of Purim as something that is beyond hedonistic overindulgence, it becomes difficult to overlook the seeming dissonance between the mood of the day and the directive to celebrate.

Perhaps we can address this challenge by taking a step back and considering the purpose and power of action in the Torah tradition. The *Sefer HaChinuch* in Parshat Bo enumerates mitzvah after mitzvah regarding the Korban Pesach. For each, the stated goal is the same: recalling G-d's kindness in rescuing us from Egypt. The Chinuch wonders if there is really a need for so many different reminders of the Exodus. He explains that the underlying philosophy behind these mitzvot is that actions have unique power:

דע כי האדם נפעל כפי פעולותיו. ולבו וכל מחשבותיו תמיד אחר מעשיו שהוא עושה בהם, אם טוב ואם רע... ואפילו שלא לשם שמים, מיד ינטה אל הטוב, ובכח מעשיו ימית היצר הרע, כי אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות.

You must know that a man is acted upon according to his actions; and his heart and all his thoughts always follow after the actions that he does — whether good or bad ... from that which is not for its own sake comes that which is for its own sake [as opposed to being for personal gain]; for the hearts are drawn after the actions.”

Sefer HaChinuch mitzvah no. 16

When teaching Torah, a *mechanech*, teacher, must balance the content and skills being taught with the equally important goal of inspiring the *talmid*, student, to grow. The process of growth is tricky for anyone, and particularly so for adolescents. A frequent conversation around Jewish ritual brings up some variation of the question of why we should daven or learn Torah if we don't feel any meaning associated with that action.

Perhaps the educational lesson of the simcha of Purim is that it actually holds the key to spiritual growth. Purim is a holiday of *galut*, and it does not give our people a lasting change or solution to our troubles. Yet it is specifically on Purim that Chazal directs us to celebrate in an extreme manner fundamentally different from the *Regalim*. Chazal are reminding us about the power of actions. When we do a mitzvah, even if there is no corresponding feeling of inspiration or meaning on the inside, it has an impact on us. People often seek inspiration and are eager for that magical moment when the stars align, the rays of sun shine through the clouds, the angelic music plays, and finally we can proclaim that we are inspired and **now** ready to act. The Torah flips that formula on its head.

The Talmud learns from the inner and outer gold covering of the Aron that “**any Torah scholar whose**

inside is not like his outside is not considered a Torah scholar.”¹² The fact that Chazal use the phrase of *tocho k’boro* (our inside should resemble our outside) and not the opposite also indicates that the direction of growth follows our external actions and travels inward, not vice versa.¹³

How do we inspire our children? Purim provides us with an unlikely but powerful template, one that focuses on encouraging participation, even if it is not immediately accompanied by meaning. Practically speaking, the action approach to growth on Purim provides us with some illuminating takeaways for educating and parenting our children:

1) Moments Matter: As Chip and Dan Heath discuss in their book *The Power of Moments*, experiences can be crafted to be memorable and have an impact. This means that a religious activity, be it a Shabbat table in the home or a chagigah in school, should be “game planned” in advance to formulate the steps that will encourage maximum participation and as a result, achieve maximum impact.

2) Family Traditions: Family rituals are important. They are even

more significant when they relate to religious observance. Is there a funny song that the family always sings at the Pesach Seder? A moving Havdalah? These actions are ultimately important in strengthening the connection our children feel toward their yiddishkeit.

3) Action!: As educators and parents, we can sometimes get stuck on determining the proper way to convey the reasoning behind our religious actions. It is of course important to have and transmit a strong background for why we do things, but the action-oriented simcha of Purim reminds us that we shouldn’t let that hold us back from giving our kids impactful experiences, and if need be, let the reasons come later.

4) Don’t Give Up: If the key to growth is the impact that our external actions have on our inner soul, then we must maintain confidence and faith that our efforts to engage our children in Jewish actions and experiences will ultimately bear fruit. The Kotzker famously teaches¹⁴ on the verse in *Shema* that directs us to place Hashem’s words “upon your heart,” that our mission is to continue to teach and add lessons upon our hearts and our children’s hearts, because we know that at some point,

the heart will eventually open and the meaning will be internalized. Working with children means playing the long game. While the impact of these experiences may not be felt until further down the road, Purim reminds us that, through action, inspiration will eventually emerge.

Purim Sameach!

Endnotes

1. Megillah 7b.
2. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah 2:15.
3. Rama, Orach Chaim 695:2, and Mishnah Berurah Beur Halacha ad loc.
4. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:17.
5. *Days of Deliverance*, 2007.
6. Ibid, p.95
7. Ibid, p.99.
8. Ibid, p.96.
9. Vayikra, 23:40.
10. Ibid, p.101.
11. Ibid, p.105.
12. Yoma 72b.
13. Rav Elimelech Biderman, *Torah Wellsprings* Parshat Mishpatim 2019.
14. Rabbi Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism*, p.152.



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A SIGNIFICANT LESSON FROM THE ODDEST OF SOURCES

One of the more common themes associated with Megilas Esther is Divine intervention. Even those familiar with the story are surprised, from year to year, how Hashem set up a perfect story, with each piece of the puzzle locking in at the right time. All this was done in a hidden manner — *hester panim*. If we look closely at the Megilah we see an additional theme to the story; one that many of us, our students, and our children need to be reminded of. What is odd, however, is the source for this most crucial lesson.

At the beginning of the Megilah we are told about Achashveirosh's big party:

וַיְהִי, בַּיָּמִים אֲחַשְׁוֵירוֹשׁ... בַּיָּמִים, הָהֵם--כְּשֶׁבֶת
הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵירוֹשׁ, עַל כֶּסֶּא מַלְכוּתוֹ, ...
בְּשִׁנַּת שְׁלוֹשׁ, לְמַלְכוֹ, עָשָׂה מִשְׁתֶּה, לְכָל-שָׂרָיו
וְעַבְדָּיו...

*And it happened in the days of
Achashveirosh ... in those days, that
King Achashveirosh sat on his throne ...
in the third year of his reign he made a
party for all his servants and workers.
Esther 1:1-3*

Why did Achashveirosh wait three years? Rashi (as well as Ibn Ezra) quotes the Gemarah in *Megilah* 11b:

'בימים ההם כשבת המלך' וכתוב בתורה
'בשנת שלש למלכו' - אמר רבא: מאי כשבת?
לאחר שנתיישרה דעתו.

"In those days, that King Achashveirosh sat" ... it further states, "in the third year of his reign." Rava said: What does it mean "that [King Achashveirosh] sat (k'sheves)"? After his mind was settled (nisyashva).



Achashveirosh was well aware of the prophecies mentioned in Sefer Yirmiyahu and Sefer Daniel, which

promised a return to Zion seventy years following the destruction. Achashveirosh, according to his incorrect calculations, felt that the seventy years were over, and therefore concluded that the prophecy would not take place. If the prophecy would not take place, then the Jews will not return to Zion, and perhaps the Jewish God is upset at them, or has even given up on them. These conclusions gave Achashveirosh a sense of *yishuv hadaas*, and as the Gemarah explains, the party only happened after his mind was settled.

Perhaps there were personal benefits to Achashveirosh if the Jewish God did indeed give up on the Jews. If, however, Achashveirosh, as an anti-Semite, wanted to celebrate our continued despair and destruction, why would he celebrate only after our Jewish God is not on our side? His hatred seems to be based on acknowledging Hashem himself!

If we fast forward all the way to chapter 6, this idea returns.

וַיִּסְפֹּר הָמָן לְזֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ, וְלִכָּל-אֶהְיִי, אֵת,
כָּל-אֲשֶׁר קָרָהוּ; וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ חֲכָמָיו וְזֶרֶשׁ אִשְׁתּוֹ,
אִם מִזֶּרַע הַיְּהוּדִים מְרַדְּכִי אֲשֶׁר הַחֲלוּת לְנֶפֶל
לִפְנֵיו לֹא-תִכָּל לוֹ--כִּי-נֶפֶל תִּפּוֹל, לִפְנֵיו.

*And Haman told over to his wife
Zeresh and all his friends, all that had
transpired. And his wise men and Zeresh
said to him: If Mordechai is from the
seed of Judaism, and you have begun to
fall to him, you won't be able to overcome
him, because you will fall to him.*

Anyone who reads this pasuk should be confused. Haman wants to kill the Jews. Zeresh is his wife. It was Zeresh who had the advice to hang Mordechai on the tree at the end of chapter 5. Now she is giving up? What caused Zeresh to change her entire philosophy and let Haman know that he stands no chance?

Toward the end of the Megilah, when the news spreads about the reversal of the decree to kill the Jews, we find an interesting response from the locals. In chapter 8 we read:

וּבְכָל-מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וּבְכָל-עִיר וָעִיר, מְקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר-הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתָּבוֹאוּ מִגִּיעֵי, שְׂמֵחָה וְשִׂשׂוֹן
לַיהוּדִים, מִשְׁתֵּה יוֹם טוֹב; וְרַבִּים מֵעַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ,
מִתְיִיבֵי-נֶפֶל פָּחַד-הַיְּהוּדִים, עָלֵיהֶם

*In every state and city, every place where
the word of the king arrived, there was
joy and happiness for the Jews, feast and
celebration, and many from the nations
of the land converted, for the fear of the
Jews fell over them.*

Again we find a fear of Jews. It is this fear that permeates our story. Achashveirosh would love to kill us and celebrate our destruction. Yet out of fear of Hashem, he is very cautious in how he goes about it. Zeresh, aware of Hashem, understands deep down that He is involved in the world and that He will protect the Jews and foil her husband's plan. Many of the locals, after seeing how Divine intervention controlled the seemingly impossible

outcome, decide on their own that this is the proper path.

We can now truly appreciate the *Medrash Rabbah* (similarly quoted in the Gemarah, Megilah 13b).

The *Medrash Rabbah*, Esther Parshah 7 states:

אמר ריש לקיש: בשעה שאמר המן הרשע
לאחשוורוש בא ונאבד את ישראל מן העולם,
אמר לו אחשוורוש: לא יכלת להון, בדיל
דאלההון, לא שביק לון כל עיקר, תא חזי מה
עביד לון למלכין קמאי... וכל מאן דאתי עליהון
למבדינהו מן עלמא ודיעץ עליהון מיבטל מן
עלמא...

*Reish Lakish states: At the moment
that Haman said to Achashveirosh, let
us wipe out the Jews from the world,
Achashveirosh responded: I can't
overcome their God. I am scared of Him,
and will not win, for see what the great
previous kings did (Paroh and Sancheiriv)
and look what happened to them ... and
anyone who tries to wipe out His people,
himself gets wiped out of the world.*

It seems that although Achashveirosh, at the opening of the Megilah, was under the impression that Hashem had given up on us, he was still cautious and fearful of actively killing Hashem's people. How did Haman convince him then to step forward? The medrash continues:

מיד אמר לון המן: אלוה שטבע פרעה בים
ועשה נסים לישראל... הוא זקן ואינו יכול
לעשות כלום, שכבר עלה נבוכדנצר והחרב
ביתו ושרף את היכלו והגלה את ישראל ופזרן
בין האומות, והיכן כחו וגבורתו שכבר הזקין...
מיד קבלו דבריו לכלות את ישראל.

*Immediately Haman responded: Their
God that drowned Paroh in the sea and
performed all the miraculous wonders,
He is elderly and has no more strength,
as we see that Nevuchadnetzar rose up,
and destroyed His house, and burned
His dwelling place and exiled the Jews
and spread them around, so what power*

*does he have left? ... Immediately
Achashveirosh (and his advisors) agreed
to annihilate the Jewish people.*

How ironic it is that the only way to convince the enemy that they can successfully hurt the Jews is to remove from within themselves a fear of Hashem.

We can also use this idea to explain why Haman wanted to originally kill us. In Perek 3 we read:

ומרדכי לא יכרע ולא ישתחוה...ויגידו להמן
אשר הוא יהודי...וימלא המן חמה.
*And Mordechai would not bow down (to
Haman)... and they told Haman that he
was a Jew... and Haman became furious.*

Haman was not only upset that a person was not bowing down to him. His anger was not even out of hatred towards the Jews. Rather his fury had some fear mixed in. If a Jew will go against my plan, will I ever become the all powerful entity that I wish to be? Perhaps Haman thinks that the Jewish God might still be on the side of the Jews.

From the oddest of sources — our major enemies — we gain a reinforcement of Hashem's existence and His involvement in the world. In yesteryear, many Jews were *baalei emunah peshuta*. They simply believed, and did not question. In today's world, many find that approach challenging. Some believe in Hashem but have trouble seeing His hand in the day to day. Others find trouble simply believing. Before researching and studying any proofs or evidence for this fundamental first step of our religion, let us be reminded of how obvious Hashem's power was from the oddest of sources: those who were against us and our God.



OUR ROLE IN THE PURIM MIRACLE: THEN & NOW

The victorious outcome of the Purim story seems to be hinged on Hashem and His hidden yet miraculous ways. However, beyond the “end of the ninth” fasting and tefillos offered by the desperate Jews of Shushan, we can see, based on the comments of Chazal, a more instrumental role the people played.

The Midrash in *VaYikra Rabba*, (28:6) states,

אמר רבי אבון ורבי נחמיה ורבי יעקב בר אבא
בשם רבי יהודה ברבי סימון רבי יוחנן ורבי
שמעון בן לקיש היא, רבי יוחנן אומר לעולם
אל תהי מצות העמר קלה בעיניך שעל ידי
מצות העמר זכה אברהם לירש את ארץ כנען.
*Rabbi Avon and Rabbi Nechemia
and Rabbi Yaakov bar Abba said in
the name of Rabbi Yehuda ben Rabbi
Simon, Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi
Shimon ben Lakish said, “Let not the
mitzva of omer be light in your eyes, for*

*through it Bnei Yisroel merit to inherit
the Land of Israel.”*



The commentators grapple with the relationship between this particular mitzva and the inheritance of our great land. The halachic rule is that all land-oriented mitzvos are only obligated in “the Land,” in Eretz Yisroel. There is one Torah-mandated exception, and that is the law of omer. [Regarding other exceptions to this rule, see Mishna, *Kiddushin*, 1:10.] Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky in his commentary on the Torah, *Emes Le’Yaakov* (Parshas Emor, 28:10), suggests that this anomaly offers a special merit to its adherence;

observing this mitzva outside of Israel will merit inheriting the Land of Israel.

Rav Kamenetsky’s suggestion requires further elucidation. Why should keeping this mitzva in the Diaspora serve as a merit for the Land of Israel more than any other mitzva kept in the Diaspora? True, it is the sole land-oriented mitzva kept outside “the Land,” but ultimately it becomes just another mitzva applicable to all Diaspora Jews. Why does it offer such a unique merit?

The Midrash continues with another enigmatic statement.

ריש לקיש אמר לעולם אל תהי מצות העומר
קלה בעיניך שעל ידי מצות העומר עשה
הקב“ה שלום בין איש לאשתו.
*Reish Lakish says, let not the mitzva of
omer be light in your eyes for it brings
peace between husband and wife.*

What is the correlation between the korban omer and harmony in a marriage?

Perhaps the answer can be found in the continuing words of the midrash. The midrash recounts the famous incident when Haman was instructed to bring Mordechai the king's horse to parade him through town. As Mordechai saw Haman approaching he feared for his life and immediately began to daven, hoping that Haman would get distracted or bored and leave him alone. The midrash quotes the ensuing conversation between Haman and Mordechai's disciples while Mordechai davened:

אמר להם במה אתם עוסקים אמרו לו במצות העומר שהיו ישראל מקריבין במקדש ביום הזה.

He said to them, In what are you engaged? They replied, On this day, when we had the Temple, we would have offered the Omer sacrifice.

The midrash continues to relate that Haman wanted to understand the nature of this sacrifice that occupied the minds of the Jews even as they dwelled in their Exile. Was it gold? Was it silver? They replied that it was merely barley. The response stunned Haman. Barley was considered inferior among the grains, and he therefore assumed that at least the quantity must be generous. How much is the offering? It must be at least ten measurements. The Jews replied, even ten grains would suffice. Haman was beside himself. Ten pieces of barley grain was as good as it gets? His visceral reaction was so profound that he proclaimed:

קומו דנצחו עשרת מנכון לעשרת אלפים קנטריא דכספא.

Stand up, for your "ten" were victorious over my ten thousand silver talents. [See Megilla 16a for a slightly different version.]

Beautiful, but puzzling. Why were the ten grains of the korban omer credited with foiling Haman's plans? After all, the Jews weren't actually sacrificing the omer! Wouldn't it have been more apropos for Haman to have said that it was the merit of learning about the omer that overpowered him, not the actual sacrifice? What is the message of this midrash?

Let us look at another intriguing discussion of our Chachamim. The Gemara, Megilla (12a) says:

שאלו תלמידיו את רשב"י מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל שבאותו הדור כליה אמר להם אמרו אתם אמרו לו מפני שנהנו מסעודתו של אותו רשע אם כן שבשושן יהרגו שבכל העולם כולו אל יהרגו.

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him, Why were the enemies of Jewish people, (a euphemism for the Jewish people themselves) in that generation deserving of annihilation? He said to them, answer the question yourselves. They replied, it is because they enjoyed the feast of that wicked one. Rabbi Shimon responded, If so, those in Shushan should have been killed as punishment, but those in the rest of the world, (who did not participate in the feast), should not have been killed.

A fascinating debate. At first glance it seems that this is a classic example of young students who were bright, but not bright enough. Having debated the issue among themselves, they concluded with an interesting and insightful approach, nonetheless rejected by their rebbe. However, we do need to keep in mind that these "young students" were disciples of the great Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and therefore their insight is worthy of our understanding.

The Jewish people of that era were not doing very well spiritually. From the time that Yehoshua led Bnei Yisroel into the Land of Israel, they

had basked in the spiritual glory of Hashem. For hundreds of years they lived, witnessed, and enjoyed the pristine kedusha of the Beis HaMikdash, and it was this generation that brought it to a tragic end. Those who were alive at the time of the feast either witnessed and suffered the fate of the disgrace and destruction of the Beis HaMikdash personally, or heard about it directly from their parents. We can only imagine the despondency and guilt that plagued them. How would they redeem themselves from such devastation? Surely it would take its toll on their spirituality, on their ability to even perceive themselves as being worthy to serve Hashem. Indeed, the Gemara, Megilla (11a), tells us that the Jews of that generation were "poor in their mitzvos."

Close examination of the wording of R. Shimon's disciples reveals that the transgression did not lie solely in their "attendance" of the feast. Arguably one can say they simply didn't have a choice. How do you live in the kingdom's capital and say no to the king's invitation? Their words were precise when they said that Bnei Yisroel "enjoyed" the feast. They didn't just attend, rather they participated, lingered, and relished in the prevailing decadence, all while the king paraded around in the priestly garments of *their* Kohen Gadol and drank from the goblets of *their* Beis HaMikdash.

In short, they began to settle in. The Jews no longer felt that deep-rooted respect of their past. Sensitivity to their history was becoming dulled, and their spiritual poverty reflected a numbness to prospects for the future.

The disciples of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai speculated that a people disconnected from their past, and with no particular interest in their future,

had become a self-destructive people.

Their master did not disagree with their core theory. Rather, he responded, we cannot accuse the rest of the Jews for a transgression that they did not commit. We don't know how the others would have behaved at the king's feast. Maybe they would have appropriately attended and gone home, without the lingering indulgences. Therefore, he concluded, we can't say for sure that this was the cause. Instead we need to find an example that is similar, but more widespread. He suggested *avoda zara*, another form of disconnect from our sacred past and disregard for the future of our religion.

With this understanding, we can return to our original midrash. The *korban omer* is truly an insignificant representation of a *korban*. Quantitatively and qualitatively lacking, it doesn't seem to bring much to the table — *and that is precisely why it is so powerful*.

We needed the warning: "Don't let the mitzva of omer seem insignificant in your eyes." A generous and robust offering grabs our attention and serves the purpose of the moment. Kohanim eat from them, families are fed. But the omer doesn't serve the present moment very well. It could be deemed insignificant in our eyes because it doesn't seem to have a purpose for the present, the here and now. Rav Yaakov explains that the Torah instructs us to take the *korban omer* with us, from Eretz Yisroel into the Diaspora, and if we hold on to it, it will be the mitzva that leads us back home. The purpose of the omer is to minimize the present, and to instead bridge our past to our future.

So too, say our Sages, when discord or disloyalty wedges its way into the unity of a married couple, it is the

insignificant omer that will keep them together. Disregard the challenges of the moment and instead focus on what you once had, and what you can have again.

Haman, in a moment, understood it all. It wasn't the learning of "*Toras omer*" that protected us, that ensured our future. If it was just Torah, then it could have been a *sugya* in *Bava Kamma* as well. Haman understood that the eternal contrast between us and him, between Bnei Yisroel and Amalek, is that while they live for the moment, we build on our past to create a future. Haman offered 10,000 silver coins to the coffers of the king — an eye-catching offer, for sure.

A gift of the moment. Yet it was the humble omer, with its lack of focus on the present, and its continuous bridging of what we once had to what we will have, that will always sustain us against our enemies. Something they can never truly understand.

In our day and age we too need a measure of the omer. We all recognize that the barrage of spiritual challenges that confront this generation is unprecedented. Technology, entitlement, easy access to substances are some of the all-too-familiar pitfalls. However, recently I have recognized a new phenomenon that I believe is at the root of these challenges.

Once upon a time, when a kid wanted to "explore," read, go off the derech, typically it was couched in a legitimate claim, of sorts. From a bad rebbe experience to bad parents, there was always a reason, an excuse sitting neatly in the pocket to be taken out and read to any listening ear. "Rabbi, I believe in the Torah, but who are the rabbis to tell me what to do?!" When there is a claim, there can be a response. But today I am no longer hearing

these justifications for abdicating their role in the *mesorah*. Today I hear a shoulder shrug, I hear, not just an apathy — that's already a given — but a disconnect. In my recent experiences, kids no longer feel the need to rationalize their changed lifestyle, to explain why it's "just not for them." They simply say, "why should I?"

It is incumbent upon us to understand this paradigm shift of attitude toward our religion, because only when we understand it do we have a chance to stop it. We are living in a time when the past is no longer of value. American heroes are demonized, the Ten Commandments are no longer the source of truth. Our National Anthem is shamed, as is the sanctity of marriage. In an era where the past has no value, there is no direction for the future. Our youth are being taught that we no longer need to justify abandoning the history of our people, that what matters is how you feel in the present. The present culture leaves them internally unstable, with no chain to anchor themselves; therefore they can easily drift away.

It is the eternal battle of our omer vs. their coins.

The Rambam famously writes, (*Laws of Megilla*, 2:18), that in the future times all the prophecies will become null, save for the Book of Esther. Perhaps it is because the Book of Esther and by extension, the holiday of Purim, is a time that we don't just celebrate the miracle of the present, but rather we chain ourselves to our past in order to guarantee our future. Indeed, this is our role in creating our own Purim miracle.



JEWISH UNITY

A few years ago, Rabbi Menachem Penner spoke to the faculty at Central, discussing the achievements and growth Am Yisroel has enjoyed in modern times. This success, he emphasized, is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing, as our numbers have increased and we have enjoyed success in many arenas, despite the desire of our enemies to destroy us. But it is also a curse, in that as we have grown, our communities have splintered due to both halachic and hashkafic differences. As a result, we have become more tribal and less communal.

Looking back, we see similar differences in the times of Esther and Mordechai. In Megillat Esther (3:8) it is written:

וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ יִשְׁנֻ עִם אֶחָד מִפָּזָר וּמִפָּרָד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלָכוּתְךָ וְדַתִּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל עַם וְאֵת דַּתִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלִמְלֶכְךָ אֵין שׁוֹה לְהַנִּיחֵם.

Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them."

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Haman describes the people of Israel as an "*am mefuzar umforad*," a nation that is scattered and dispersed. Although the Jews were not a unified people, they were considered "other" with a unique set of laws. These differences incensed Haman and he was determined to eradicate them, as he says to Ahasuerus in the next pasuk:

אִם עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יִכְתֹּב לְאַבְדֵם וְעֲשֶׂתָּה אֲלֵפִים כֶּכָר כֶּסֶף אֶשְׁקוֹל עַל יְדֵי עֲשֵׂי הַמֶּלָּאכָה

לְהַבִּיא אֶל גְּבוּי הַמֶּלֶךְ.

If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.

Additionally, the midrash tells us:

אֵין אַתָּה מוֹצֵא יָמִים קִשִּׁין שֶׁהָיוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַפִּילָה, וְיוֹשְׁבֵין בַּחֲשָׁךְ וּבִצְרָה, כְּאוֹתָן הַיָּמִים שֶׁהָיוּ בִּימֵי הָמָן, שֶׁאָמַר לְאַחֲשֵׁרוּשׁ יִשְׁנֻ עִם אֶחָד מִפָּזָר וּמִפָּרָד (אֶסְתֵּר ג ח).

There were no days that were more difficult for the people of Israel, these were the darkest days, where they sat in pain and anguish. What were these days? The days of Haman.

Midrash Tehillim no. 22

These verses and their explanation lead to a series of questions. What does it mean that the people of Israel were a nation that was both scattered and dispersed? Why the seemingly double language of scattered and dispersed? And why were these days the darkest? Bnei Yisroel had been through slavery in Egypt, went

through the episode of the *meraglim* in the desert and the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, which ultimately lead to the expulsion of the Jews from Israel. Yet only these days are described as *yamim kashin*, difficult days. Why?

To answer these questions, we need to first parse the Megillah for details of the lives of Bnei Yisroel during this time, the 5th century B.C.E., to fully understand what they were going through.

Megillat Esther opens by describing how Ahasuerus ruled over 127 different nations. At the end of the Megillah (9:16) we are told, *ushe'ar haYehudim asher b'medinot hamelech* — and the rest of the Jews lived in the king's other provinces. Clearly, the Jews were living throughout the kingdom separate and apart from each other. But is this enough reason for Am Yisroel to be described as *mefuzar umforad*?

When describing the parties that Ahasuerus held, especially in chapter 1, verse 7, there is a belief that the vessels used during the party may have been from the Beit Hamikdash. According to the Gemara, *Megillah* 11b, Ahasuerus miscalculated the time when the *galut* of the Jewish people would end. Yirmiyahu the prophet had predicted a 70-year exile for the Jewish people followed by the rebuilding of the Beit Hamikdash. Ahasuerus calculated that the 70 years had passed since the exile, and believed that God had abandoned the Jews and that they remained in exile permanently. According to the Gemara,

מיפרכי אפיק מאני דבי מקדשא ואשתמש בהו.

Ahasuerus decided to take the vessels of the Beit Hamikdash and use them at his party.

As a nation in exile, the Jews had lost what unified them — a homeland and their central place of worship, where everyone came together in religious practice to serve God. Furthermore, the nation was beginning to fragment.

According to the Gemara, *Megillah* 13b, Haman tells Ahasuerus, *yashnu min hamitzvot*, the Jewish people have been asleep with regard to the mitzvot. Spiritually, they are disconnected from their God and ultimately from each other. This is the Jews' darkest time, when they are not just distant from one another physically, they are distant from Hashem — and as such, this is when they can be hurt. This is the time Haman could strike a decisive blow against the Jewish people.

So what hope do the Jews have? In this time when they are so vulnerable, how could they fight such a powerful enemy? Esther, in her wisdom, knew what needed to be done to combat Haman.

She tells Mordechai (4:16):

לך כנוס את כל היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל תאכלו ואל תשתו שלשת ימים לילה ויום גם אני ונערתי אצום כן ובכו אבוא אל המלך אשר לא כדת וכאשר אבדתי אבדתי.

Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!

In order to unify the Jews, she must gather them together starting with those in Shushan. And as they come together, Esther wanted them to take the next step by turning to Hashem together as a nation and pray for their salvation. They may have been lax in

their performance of the mitzvot until that point, but at that moment, they have an opportunity to make up for their deficit by fasting and performing teshuvah.

And as we all know, the Jews' fortune turned. Megillat Esther (9:2) states:

נקהל היהודים בעריהם בכל מדינות המלך אהשורוש לשלח יד במבקשי רעתם ואיש לא עמד לפנייהם כי נפל פחדם על כל העמים.

Throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews gathered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples.

The Jews were successful in beating back the evil forces of Haman. Not only that, the Megillah draws attention to the unity of the Jews by specifically mentioning the Jews in their cities throughout the province. It wasn't just the Jews in Shushan banding together to fight Haman and his forces, it was also all the Jews in the rest of the provinces throughout the kingdom coming together. The root ק.ה.ל — come together — appears three more times in chapter 9. Once in verse 15, ויקהלו היהודים אשר בשושן — And the Jews in Shushan came together. Again in verse 16, ושאר היהודים אשר במדינות — The rest of the Jews, those in the king's provinces, came together. And once more in verse 18, והיהודים אשר בשושן נקהלו — but the Jews in Shushan came together.

And what did they do upon completion of their victory? The Megillah continues in chapter 9, verse 19:

שמחה ומשתה יום טוב ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו.

A day of merrymaking and feasting, and as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another.

The immediate response is a shared service celebrating God, where they feast together and send each other gifts in celebration of their victory and in appreciation of God. Mordechai sends letters to the people far and wide to memorialize this newfound unity, reminding them that to maintain this unity they must do mitzvot together.

It is written in the Megillah (9:27):

קִיְמוּ וְקִבְלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים עֲלֵיהֶם וְעַל יָרֵעָם וְעַל כָּל הַנָּלוּיִם עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר לְהִיּוֹת עֹשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּתָבָם וְכֻמָּנָם בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה.
The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

According to the Gemara in *Megillah*, the Jews accepted upon themselves all the mitzvot of the Torah:

אמר שמואל אי הואי התם הוה אמינא מלתא דעדיפא מכולהו שנאמר קימו וקבלו קימו למעלה מה שקיבלו למטה.

Shmuel said: Had I been there (among the Tana'im), I would have stated a matter that is superior to them all, as it is stated: "They confirmed, and took upon themselves," which can be interpreted to mean: They confirmed above in heaven what they took upon themselves below on earth.

While they accepted all of the mitzvot and were no longer "sleeping" with regard to the mitzvot, the *Megillah* describes four specific mitzvot: reading the *Megillah*, giving *matanot leevyonim* (charity to the poor and oppressed), *mishloach manot* (gifts to our friends), and eating a *seudah*. How do each of these fit into this message of unity of Purim?

Let us look at the mitzvah of reading the *Megillah*. We must read it not

once but twice — first to demarcate the beginning of the holiday and once again in the morning. In order to fulfill our mitzvah, we must hear every word. There is no other such communal mitzvah in which we must hear every word or the mitzvah is not fulfilled.

We are forced to come out of our homes, to come to our central place of worship — to our *mikdash me'at* (miniature Temple), as a *Beit Kneset* is often referred to. There, we come together equal as a people — we all have the same obligation, to hear the reading of the *megillah*. We all have to come together and remember this dark and terrible time of spiritual upheaval and (separation) of the Jewish people.

What else must we do? We continue this unity by giving gifts to people — the *mishloach manot*. There is a minimal number of food items we give (2) to a person, and ideally, we would give to each other enough for our meal.

And we have a specific mitzvah of giving *matanot leevyonim*. We always have a mitzvah to give *tzedakah*, but no other holiday has a specific, unique mitzvah of giving *tzedakah*, except for Purim. Why? This is a time when we must be unified and think of every single person in our community — our neighbor, our friend and also the stranger in our midst who may not have what we have. This individual must be a welcome part of the community, and must be part of this mitzvah.

And then, finally, we come together for a meal. Rambam, *Megillah* 2:15, writes:

כיצד חובת סעודה זו שיאכל בשר ויתקן סעודה נאה כפי אשר תמצא ידו, ושותה יין עד

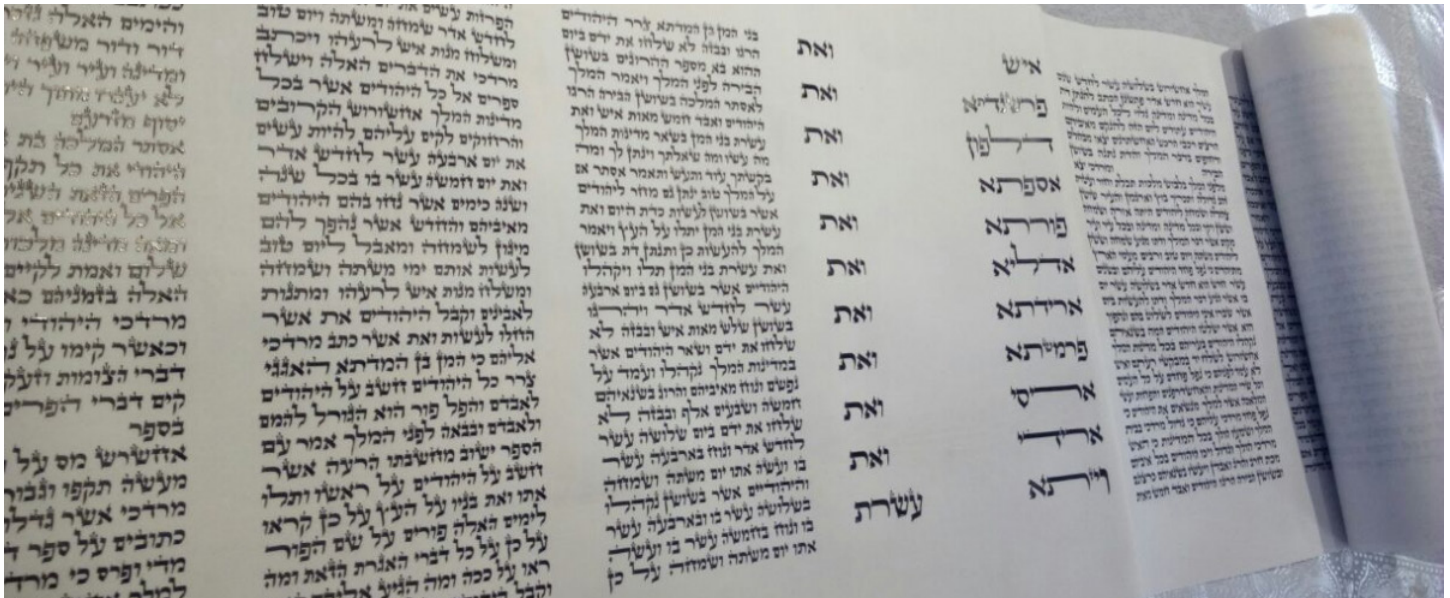
שישתכר וירדם בשכרות.

What is the obligation of the meal of seudah? One must eat meat and have a nice meal according to what they can afford and drink wine until they fall asleep.

Studies have shown that families that eat together, stay together. [See "9 Scientifically Proven Reasons to Eat Dinner as a Family" (<https://www.goodnet.org/articles/9-scientifically-proven-reasons-to-eat-dinner-as-family>).] By coming together over food and wine we show that we care about one another and are committed to each other.

When faced with such adversity, when separated and scattered and lacking in our religious devotion to God, we need to look at Purim to remind us of our ability to come together in *achdut*. Purim is not simply a nice, uplifting story; it provides a roadmap to achieve this unity. It is the uniqueness of these mitzvot that show us how we can achieve this unity.

One of the more striking aspects of these mitzvot is that they all touch on a sense of community; having a shared experience in which we remember our past in a very meticulous fashion (the reading of the *Megillah*), showing our care for others in the community and thinking beyond ourselves (*matanot leevyonim* and *mishloach manot*), and coming together as family and friends around a festive meal (the *seudah*). These are all ways that we can come together and overcome any potential differences — regardless of who we are religiously today and where we are, we all have a shared past that brings us together. It behooves us as a people to remember this for the future.



MEMUCHAN IS HAMAN: A CAUTIONARY TALE

Each chag can be considered from its historical, moral or theological perspective, and Purim is no exception. The Megilla can be taken as a work of theology that instructs us about the hidden hand of God. Alternatively, it can be understood as the historical record of the redemption of the Jewish people during a major persecution or as the historical setting of the rabbinic enactment to celebrate each month of Adar. We, however, would like to focus on a different facet of the book of Esther: its function as a cautionary tale based on its surprising choice of main character: Haman.

While God is working in the background of the story, the character who moves the plot along is Haman. By focusing on this point, we will learn the moral of the story: that the actions of a megalomaniac lead to

his undoing. In order to demonstrate how this is so, we will first need to ask and answer another question: Why do Chazal assume that Memuchan is Haman?



At first glance, there is little evidence that Memuchan, advisor to Achashverosh in the first chapter, is Haman. After Vashti refuses to appear at her husband's party, Memuchan suggests to Achashverosh that he should understand her offense not only as an attack against him personally, but as a crime against all officers in the kingdom:

...לֹא עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ עֲוֹתָהּ וְשָׂתִי הַמֶּלֶכָה
כִּי עַל כָּל הַשָּׂרִים וְעַל כָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל
מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחָשְׁוֶרֶשׁ.

Not only against the king has Queen Vashti sinned, but against all of the officers and against all of the nations in the king's provinces.

Esther 1:16

Jumping the line ahead of Achashverosh's other, more senior advisors (*Megilla* 12b), he proposes a radical solution: The king should not

wait to punish Vashti, and he should not use the courts.

At this point, Memuchan seems to be no more than a character in the prologue who sets up the story for Vashti's downfall and the eventual ascent of Esther. But if we take careful note of his actions, we see political maneuverings that identify Memuchan as none other than the main antagonist of the Megilla, Haman.

First, Memuchan and Haman seem to share assumptions regarding the well-being of the king and the well-being of the empire. When Vashti, by refusing to attend her husband's party, personally offends Achashverosh, Memuchan suggests that this is a national problem, as we noted above:

וַיֹּאמֶר מִמּוּכָן לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַשָּׂרִים לֹא עַל
הַמֶּלֶךְ לְבַדּוֹ עֲוֹתָהּ וְשָׂתִי הַמֶּלֶכָּה כִּי עַל כָּל
הַשָּׂרִים וְעַל כָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר בְּכָל מְדִינֹת
הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ.

Thereupon Memuchan declared in the presence of the king and the ministers: "Queen Vashti has committed an offense not only against Your Majesty but also against all the officials and against all the peoples in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus."

Esther 1:16

Haman soon relies on the same

assumption — that the king's well-being is the same as the well-being of the empire — when he wants Achashverosh to authorize a genocide against the Jewish people:

וַיֹּאמֶר הָמָן לַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ יֵשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד
מִפְּזָר וּמִפֶּרֶד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלְכוּתְךָ
וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל עַם וְזֹאת דַּתִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם
עֹשִׂים וְלַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין שׂוּהָ לְהַנִּיחָם:

*Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in **Your Majesty's interest** to tolerate them."*

Esther 3:8

At this point, Haman need not even make the point explicitly; it is simply obvious that if it is not in the king's interest to tolerate the Jews, then it is in nobody's interest to tolerate them.

Additionally, the Gra notes that Memuchan's seemingly minor suggestion that the king issue a personal decree (1:19) that Vashti be replaced for crossing him contains a legal tidal wave, which radically alters the relationship between the king and his advisors. Under traditional Persian law, the king may not simply rule on matters pertaining to the king; by example, Darius is unable to

protect Daniel from the machinations of his other advisors and has a difficult time marshalling the right to execute his accusers (Daniel chap. 6). Similarly here, Achashverosh is unable to punish Vashti without turning to his court: "then the king consulted the sages ... for matters of the king were subject to experts in law and adjudication" (1:14, see Biur HaGra). With Memuchan's innovation, however, this limitation of the king's power is removed. As the Gra notes, "Everyone will hear that the king can rule for himself on any matter in his kingdom, even what pertains to him personally. And this rule was significant because this would increase their awe of the king." Or, more succinctly in the Malbim's words, "from this point on, the king's sovereignty was absolute" (1:19). Memuchan's additional rule, which was unnecessary for and irrelevant to the execution of Vashti, changed the rules of the game and permanently endangered the lives of the king's advisors. From this point on, Achashverosh seems to have no advisors until Harvona's comments in chapter 7. In the meantime, Achashverosh is advised by one man, outside of his "young servants" (6:3): Haman, the only beneficiary of Persia's terrifying new policy. It seems

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likely, therefore, that Memuchan did not create this power vacuum in order for someone else to occupy it; rather, he established himself as the last man standing, and he was simply known by another name from this point forward:

וַיְסַפֵּר לָהֶם הַמֶּן אֶת...כֹּל אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ
וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוֹ עַל הַשָּׂרִים וְעַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ.
*and Haman told them ... all about
how the king had promoted him and
advanced him above the officials and the
king's courtiers.*

Esther 5:11

Last, we do not know much about Memuchan, the seemingly reckless advisor who endangered himself with this new rule. Why would he suggest something so dangerously irrational? What was his motivation?

We can resolve this question by pointing to the megalomaniac who occupies the rest of the story: Haman. After receiving the slight of one man who refused to bow to him, Haman “looked contemptuously upon

punishing Mordechai alone,” feeling it beneath him to do any less than to kill all Jews (3:5-6). Only a genocide could constitute sufficient salve for his insult.

After receiving the honor of an invitation to Esther’s party, Haman obsesses over the fact that Mordechai still refuses to show him honor. He has great wealth, many sons, the top political position in the empire:

וְכָל זֶה אֵינֶנּוּ שְׂוָה לִי בְּכָל עֵת אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתִי
אֶת מֶרְדֵּכָי הַיְּהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בַּשַּׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ.
*Yet all this means nothing to me every
time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the
palace gate.*

Esther 5:13

Haman heard the words, “what should be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?” and immediately assumed the king must be talking about him before suggesting that Achashverosh effectively make him look like king for the day (6:6-9).

In short, Haman was a first-rate megalomaniac: he was obsessed with

the pursuit of power and pursued it in an absolute manner. Indeed, nothing else mattered to him.

The assumption that Memuchan is Haman is what establishes this Megilla as a cautionary tale. As the Gra says, “It was caused by Heaven that he should prepare the salvation by his own hand.” (1:19) Or, *venahafoch hu*, we can reverse this sentiment and understand that it was the will of the Almighty that Haman be the one to orchestrate his own destruction. Haman’s political destruction comes as a result of his request to be led through the streets of Shushan on the king’s horse. Haman’s life is taken by the gallows that he sets up to kill Mordechai. He might have been saved by the old Persian system to protect advisors from the whims and wishes of the king, but he was the one who dismantled it. If the antagonist of this cautionary tale teaches us one thing, it is that each malevolent maneuver to grab power will lead to self-destruction.





PURIM JOKES AND SHPIELS

As a school principal, one of the most difficult conversations I have each year is trying to explain to new non-Jewish faculty what a Purim shpiel is and why they should accept how they are depicted.

I have a much less successful conversation each year when trying to explain to students what the goal of a Purim shpiel should be and what the proper boundaries of its humor are.

In order to think about this issue, we must also consider what the goal of humor is in general and why jokes, shpiels, grammen and the like have come to be particularly associated with Purim.

We know, of course, that the days of Purim are *yemei mishteh v'simcha* — days of revelry and joy. The simcha of Purim is clearly different from the simcha of other holidays. The mitzvah



to drink on Purim is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the mitzvah of *simchas Yom Tov*, which is also expressed through the drinking of wine. However, the concept of *ad d'lo yada*, of becoming drunk to the point of diminished cognitive ability, is a completely different type of spiritual/emotional experience than the simcha of Yom Tov expressed through the joyful sharing of wine and meat at the Yom Tov table.

Moreover, *simchas Purim* has long been associated with the breaching of halachic and general religious norms. Not only is drunkenness itself normally considered impermissible, the idea of aspiring to “not knowing” seems anathema to our high religious

aspirations. Rambam famously begins the *Guide for the Perplexed* with the question: How could eating from the Tree of Knowledge be a sin if attaining knowledge is the highest of religious goals? Beyond this, the Gemara, *Megillah* 7b, introduces the obligation to drink on Purim in conjunction with a story in which Rabbah actually murders R. Zera while drunk on Purim and, while Rabbah does R. Zera the favor of resurrecting him, he does not seem particularly repentant. Indeed, this story is what led some Rishonim to conclude that we are not supposed to actually get drunk on Purim (see Ran, *Megillah* 3b). Skipping forward generations, the Rama (OC 696:8) notes that several halachically questionable Purim practices had developed by his time in the 16th century, including the wearing of opposite-gender clothing and stealing other people's items as

part of Purim jest. Putting aside the debate about whether these practices are in fact permissible on Purim, what is clear is they had become widely practiced on Purim.

Having established that the type of simcha we experience on Purim is more mischievous and boundary-breaking than on other days, we still need to understand why. Why are this type of simcha and these types of boundary breaches associated particularly with Purim? What do they have to do with the Megillah or the events and salvation of Purim? And, to return explicitly to our original question, does the Purim shpiel and related Purim humor fit into this acceptable Purim practice and why would it be particularly relevant to Purim?

Before advancing a theory as to why we do these things on Purim, and when done right, why they can be important and positive aspects of our Purim celebration, it is important to note the strong opposition to the Purim shpiel that does exist.

In several teshuvos (e.g. *Yechaveh Da'as* 5:50) and in *Yalkut Yosef*, *Hilchos Purim*, Rav Ovadiah Yosef

decries this custom of directing jokes at Rabbanim, which violates the commandment to not degrade a *talmid chacham*, or when directed at other people, to embarrass them in public. These sins are among the most egregious of transgressions and even according to those who permit some of the practices mentioned by the Rama, mocking people in Purim shpiels can in no way be permitted. Rav Ovadiah calls on all who are able to do what they can to root out this widely held custom, and he admonishes those who sit passively and watch without protest. In a particularly sharp turn of phrase, Rav Shlomo Aviner, when asked in an interview about whether the Rama's possible allowance of stealing on Purim means that the shpiel is allowed, said, "Oy! How the yetzer harah works overtime to permit the forbidden!"

Without delving too far into the halachic details, there are differences between the cases that are possibly allowed by the Rama and outright mockery. In terms of wearing opposite-gender clothing, there are those who generally permit it in instances in which the clothes are not

being worn for the purpose of being like the other gender. For instance, a woman who wears her husband's jacket because she is cold is clearly not trying to dress like a man. So too, in the context of costumes in a cultural setting in which costumes are the norm (such as on Purim), it is not considered a violation to dress as the opposite gender. Similarly, in a setting in which snatching other people's items as a prank has become part of the normal celebration, *hefker beis din hefker* — the concept that allows rabbinic authority to transfer property, especially in light of prevailing custom — can be applied to render this snatching not really stealing at all. According to these views, Purim does not really allow for the breaking of any halachic requirements; rather, only practices that are technically permitted, despite their approximation of a prohibition, were ever allowed.

These strong objections being noted, the custom is very widespread, and I, as I am sure many others, have seen many great *talmidei chachamim* listen to, enjoy and appreciate even some very sharp and biting grammen and shpiels. So what can be made of this



practice and its connection to Purim?

Two themes of Purim can help us understand the role of humor on Purim.

First, there is often a deeper truth lying behind events than what is readily apparent. This theme is expressed in the name Esther, which alludes to the hidden presence of God in guiding the fate of the Jewish people, even in exilic times. The practice of drinking on Purim, as exemplified by the notion of *nichnas yayin yatza sod* — when one drinks wine secrets emerge — is a manifestation of the idea that there are deeper meanings behind reality than are readily apparent. The initial failure of the Jews in Shushan to see the deeper truths and to be taken in by the glitter and gold of their new position in the Persian Empire is what led to the catastrophic decree of Purim. It was also the method of Purim's salvation, through the hidden hand of God guiding Haman's lots to the date primed for redemption.

Humor can play a similar role in helping people notice and pay attention to truths that often remain concealed. One way of understanding what makes something funny is that a joke reveals an uncomfortable truth that normally cannot be said, but it does so in a manner — such as exaggeration or word play — that makes it socially acceptable to be revealed. There is more than a grain of truth in the aphorism, “behind every joke is a grain of truth.” Allowing ourselves to look at our faults and foibles and to honestly face what we see in the mirror, even if it's a funhouse mirror, is an important step in the self-reflection necessary for growth.

Ironically, humor, which twists

reality, is a powerful tool in helping people see behind the mask and develop an honest assessment of themselves, their institutions and their communities. Haman too, by holding up a grotesque, distorted reflection of the Jews, by calling out the *am echad* — the unified nation of One — *mefuzar umforad bein ha'amim* — as a scattered people mixed among the nations — helped the Jews realize the gap between how they were acting and what they truly were. Humor, when used correctly, can facilitate a refreshingly honest, deep look at the truth of what really is and, as such, is an *avodah* perfectly attuned with the spirit of Purim.

Humor is a powerful tool in helping people see behind the mask and develop an honest assessment of themselves, their institutions and their communities. When used correctly, it can facilitate a refreshingly honest, deep look at the truth of what really is and is an *avodah* perfectly attuned with the spirit of Purim.

A second theme of Purim is that the forces we think are running the world are an illusion. Throughout the Megillah, the word *hamelech*, the king, ostensibly refers to Achashverosh; but Chazal tell us that *HaMelech* is really God. God's name is not mentioned in the Megillah, but God is always there.

The king we see is really a foolish puppet playing a part without any of the power he presents himself as having.

Satire, the form of humor employed in most successful Purim shpiels, is made for exactly this goal. Satire tears down the carefully cultivated images of the powerful. Understanding that God controls all leads us to realize that all human power needs to be checked so we never allow ourselves to be confused about the true source of this power. It is not uncommon for institutions and people to take themselves and their power very seriously. Sometimes adherents also grant an almost complete, unassailable perfection to their leaders. On Purim, the custom has become to subject even the *roshei hayeshiva* to satire. This *avodah* ensures that no matter how revered, no person is ever elevated to a divine stature. We remember that while there are many *melachim*, there is and can only be one *HaMelech*.

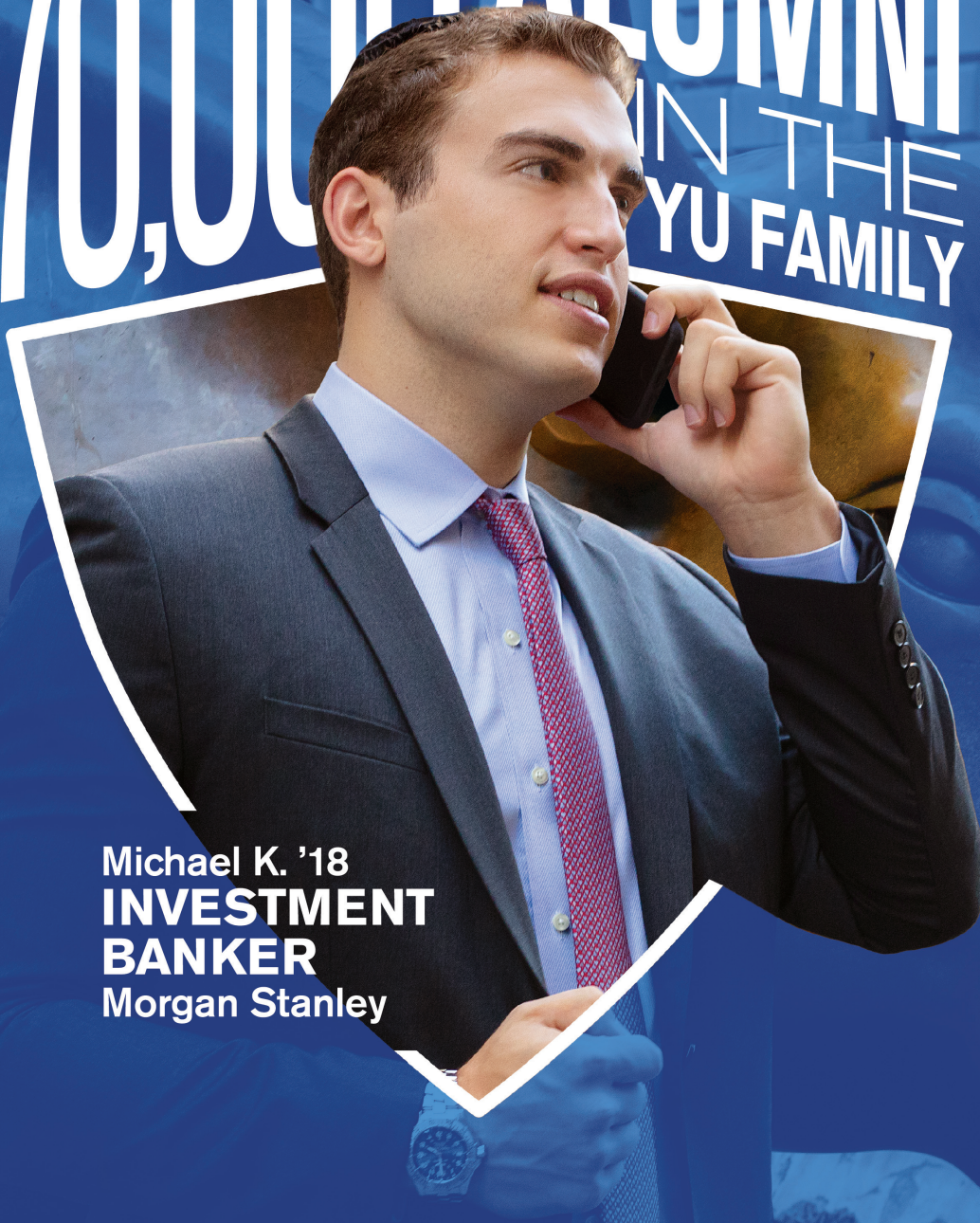
To be sure, on most days of the year, maintaining the highest standards of honoring our chachamim is of paramount importance. After all, *k'vod chachamim* is associated with *k'vod Shamayim*, but it cannot be mistaken for *k'vod Shamayim*. On Purim, we have the opportunity to expose the human frailty of even our loftiest institutions, and by doing so, reveal the true absolute power of God.

As Yeshayahu (5:15-16) tells us,

וַיִּשַׁח אָדָם וַיִּשְׁפֹּל-אִישׁ וְעֵינָיו גְּבוּהִים תִּשְׁפֹּלֶנָּה
וַיִּגְבֶּה ה' צְבָאוֹת בַּמִּשְׁפָּט וְהָאֵל-הַקָּדוֹשׁ נִקְדָּשׁ
בַּצִּדְקָה.

Yea, man is bowed, And mortal brought low; Brought low is the pride of the haughty And the LORD of Hosts is exalted by judgment, The Holy God proved holy by retribution.

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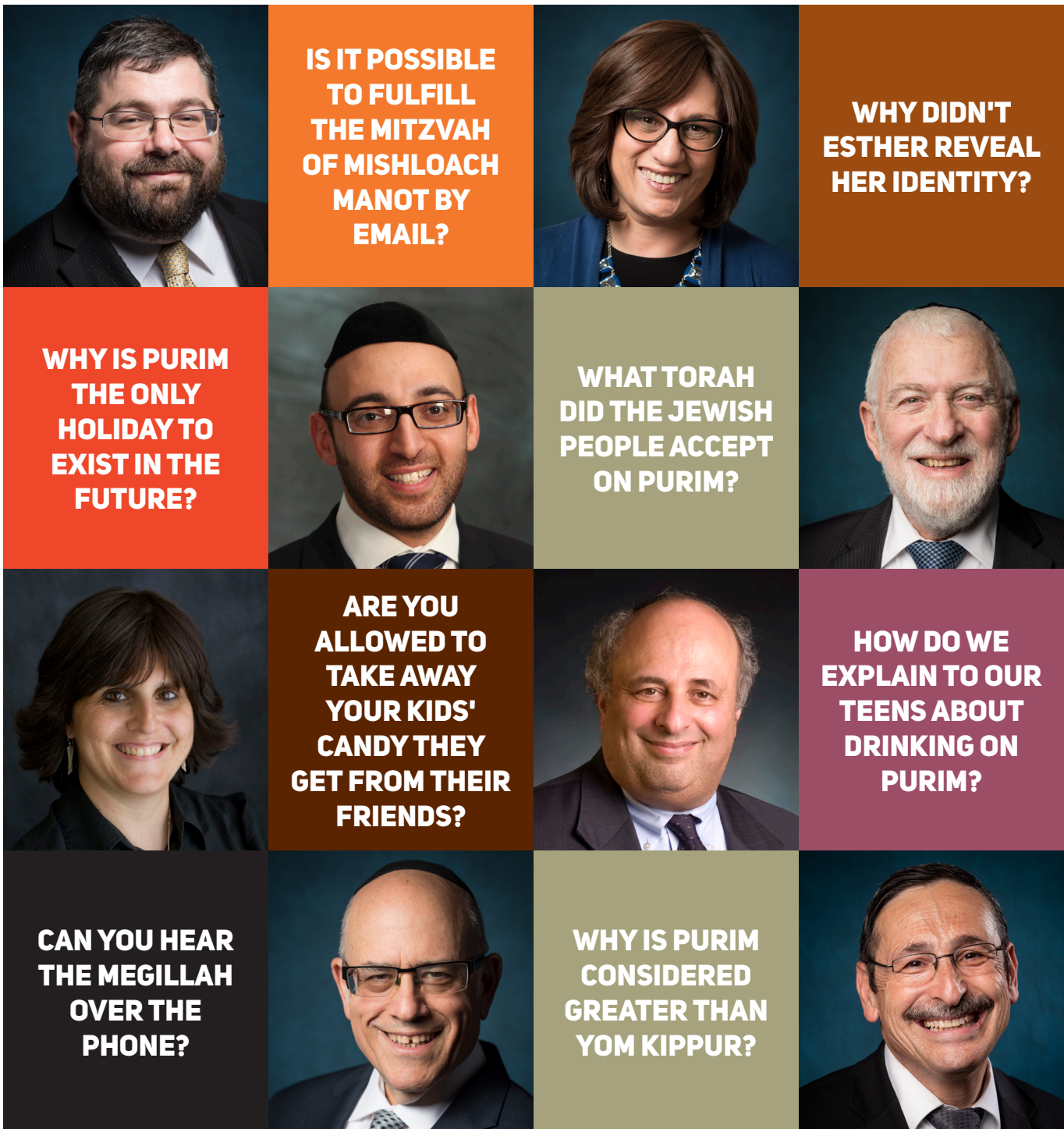


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