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PURIM: A REENACTMENT OF SINAI

In celebration of the incredible miracle that took place in the Purim story, Mordechai and Esther formulated the holiday that commemorates our national salvation:

על כן ה'יהודים הפְּרָזִים הַיִּשְׁבִּים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת
עוֹשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לַחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר שְׂמֵחָה
וּמְשֻׁתָּה יוֹם טוֹב וּמְשֻׁלוֹחַ מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ.

That is why village Jews, who live in unwallled towns, observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and make it a day of merrymaking and feasting, and as a holiday and an occasion for sending gifts to one another.

Esther 9:19

One of the most defining features of this holiday is the mitzvah of *mishloach manos* — sending gifts to one another. There is a well-known debate between the *Manos Halevi* (commentary to 9:19) and the *Terumas Hadeshen* (111) regarding the nature of this mitzvah. Is the purpose to generate a broader sense of unity among the Jewish people, or is it more particular to the Purim experience — a mandate of interpersonal responsibility to ensure that the entire community has the requisite resources to enjoy the Purim feast?

Rav Yitzchak Hunter, in his work *Pachad Yitzchak* (31), notes the unique nature of this mitzvah on Purim. Generally, the mandate for Jewish unity finds expression in interactions that take place between individuals. Purim is unique in that this ambition is ritualized into a

formal halachic requirement, infusing the chag with an energized social dimension of communal connectivity. Rav Hutner wonders why this approach to unity is found specifically in the celebration of Purim, in contrast to the many other chagim that commemorate national salvation.

The *Pachad Yitzchak* explains that Purim celebrates not only the salvation of the Jewish people, but the religious revival that it inspired.

וַיִּתְּצֵבוּ בַתְּחִיתָהּ הָהָר אָמַר רַב אַבְדִּימִי בֶר
חָמָא בֶר חָסָא מִלְּמַד שְׁכַפָּה הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ
הוּא עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת הָהָר כְּגִיטָה וְאָמַר לֵהֶם אִם
אַתֶּם מִקְבְּלִים הַתּוֹרָה מוֹטֵב וְאִם לֹא שֵׁם
תֵּהָא קְבוּרַתְכֶם אָמַר רַב אַחָא בֶר יַעֲקֹב מִכָּאן
מוֹדַעַא רַבָּה לְאוּרִייתָא אָמַר רַבָּא אֵף עַל פִּי
כֵּן הָדוֹר קְבֻלוֹה בִּימֵי אַחְשׁוּרוֹשׁ דְּכֹתִיב קִימוּ
וְקִבְלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים קִימוּ מַה שְּׁקִיבְלוּ כְּבָר.

"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. Rava said: Nevertheless, they accepted it anew in the times of Achashveirosh as it states "The Jews fulfilled and they accepted," they fulfilled what they already accepted.

Shabbos 88a

The existential threat to the Jewish people was ultimately rooted in the deterioration of their loyalty to Torah

observance, as depicted by their participation in Achashveirosh's party at the outset of the Megillah. The salvation of Am Yisroel was greeted by a renewed commitment to the values and ideals of our Torah and a re-creation of the Sinai experience — the original moment of our embracing G-d's word. Rav Hutner explains that one of the defining features of the original *kabalas Hatorah* was the unity of the Jewish people:

וַיַּחַן שֵׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל. כְּאִישׁ אֶחָד בְּלֵב אֶחָד
"*And there Israel encamped [in front of Mount Sinai]*" — *as one man and with one heart.*

Rashi, Shemos 19:2

Purim, as a reenacting of the commitment of *kabalas Hatorah*, also necessitates this dimension of unity. The mitzvah of *mishloach manos* is intended to serve as the *ke'ish echad b'leiv echad* (as one man and with one heart) moment of the Purim experience. Accepting the Torah, in both generations, required a platform of unity.

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POINTING A FINGER AT ACHASHVEIROSH

The Gemara (*Megillah* 16a) makes an astonishing comment about Esther's relationship with Achashveirosh:

ותאמר אסתר איש צר ואויב המן הרע הזה
אמר ר' אלעזר מלמד שהיתה מחווה כלפי
אחשורוש ובא מלאך וסטר ידה כלפי המן.

"And Esther said: The adversary and the enemy is this wicked Haman"
(*Esther* 7:6). Rabi Elazar said: This teaches us that she was pointing toward Achashveirosh, and an angel came and moved her hand toward Haman.

This statement is nothing less than astonishing. Why would Esther even think of pointing to Achashveirosh? After all, Haman is the one who was plotting against the Jews! How could Esther become distracted from the



goal of her properly prepared plan to eliminate Haman, especially at such a critical moment? This short passage in the Gemara is laden with meaning and hints to some major themes of *Megillat Esther*.

Esther's Plan

It is possible that Esther indeed thought that the root of the entire tragedy was Achashveirosh. While it is certainly possible to view Achashveirosh as a fool who is manipulated by Haman, the Gemara (*Megillah* 12a) presents an opinion that Achashveirosh shrewdly manipulated Haman. The Gemara (*Megillah* 14a) expresses the idea as follows:

משל דאחשורוש והמן למה הדבר דומה לשני בני אדם לאחד היה לו תל בתוך שדהו ולאחד היה לו חריץ בתוך שדהו בעל חריץ אמר מי יתן לי תל זה בדמים בעל התל אמר מי יתן לי חריץ זה בדמים לימים נזדווגו זה אצל זה אמר לו בעל חריץ לבעל התל מכור לי תילך אמר לו טול אותה בחנם והלואי.

Achashveirosh and Haman may be compared to two people — one had a large ditch in his field, and the other had a huge mound of dirt in his field. The one with the ditch wondered how he could purchase the mound, and the mound owner wanted to purchase the ditch. Eventually, the two met, and the ditch owner offered the mound owner to purchase the mound, and the mound owner replied, “If only you would take the mound for free!”

Achashveirosh, in this parable, is the mound owner, Haman is the ditch owner, and the Jews are regarded by both Haman and Achashveirosh as dirt. Achashveirosh wanted to rid himself of the Jews but was unwilling to do so because he feared the consequences should his efforts fail. Thus, he needed someone to dispose of the Jews for him. Haman lacked the authority to eliminate the Jews and thus coveted the power to execute his evil plan. Once Achashveirosh discovered that Haman was willing to dispose of the Jews, Achashveirosh was thrilled to permit Haman to eliminate the Jewish People without payment (see Esther 3:11). Achashveirosh reasoned that if Haman’s plan encountered problems, he would simply place all the blame on Haman and Haman would fall.

Accordingly, Esther viewed Achashveirosh as the source of the problem. Thus, she considered that even if she eliminated Haman,

Achashveirosh would remain in power and the threat to the Jews would not be completely eliminated. Recall that the Gemara (*Megillah* 14a) states that Hallel is not recited on Purim because Achashveirosh remains in power, and the threat to our People is not entirely eliminated (unlike Pesach when Paroh is thoroughly disempowered at Keriyat Yam Suf).

The desire to eliminate Achashveirosh becomes even more understandable if we consider the history of Persian kings. Sefer Ezra-Nechemia (especially Perek 4 of Ezra) records that the Persian kings were very positively disposed toward the Jewish People. Koresh (Cyrus) granted the Jews the right to return to Yerushalayim and to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash. Daryavesh (Darius) permitted the Jews to complete the construction of the Beit HaMikdash and even financed the completion of the project. Artachshasta (Artaxerxes) permitted Nechemiah to reconstruct the walls of Yerushalayim.

Achashveirosh is the only Persian emperor in Sefer Ezra-Nechemia to stand in the way of the Jews progressing in Yerushalayim (Ezra 4:6 and see Ezra 6:14 in which Achashveirosh is excluded from the list of Persian emperors who contributed toward the completion of the Beit HaMikdash). Thus, Esther believed that if she eliminated Achashveirosh, she would thereby

pave the way for a new emperor who would reinstate the traditional positive Persian policy toward Am Yisrael and Yerushalayim.

Esther even thinks she can succeed in her plan to accuse Achashveirosh and eliminate him. Achashveirosh is an enormously unpopular ruler. We see that his servants plot against him (Esther 2:21-23) and that Achashveirosh is fearful of others plotting against him (Esther 4:11, 6:1 and 7:8). If we subscribe to the theory that Achashveirosh is Xerxes (see *Da’at Mikra’s* introduction to *Megillat Esther*), then Achashveirosh’s vulnerability is very understandable. Xerxes, early in his reign, had led the Persians into a ruinous war against the Greeks during which the Persian army was nearly eliminated and the royal treasury was nearly depleted.

Thus, Esther hopes to save the Jews by eliminating the true source of their problem, which is Achashveirosh, not Haman. Once Achashveirosh is eliminated, Haman automatically becomes disempowered and irrelevant.

Hashem’s Plan

While Esther certainly has devised a brilliant plan to completely save our people, Hashem does not approve of the plan. In fact, Hashem sends an angel to modify Esther’s plan, perhaps because the plan is overly ambitious and risky. Esther assumes that after she points to Achashveirosh as the true source of evil in the empire, she will rally the servants and royal advisors at the party to support her cause and join her in outright rebellion. However, as is evident from *Megillat Esther*, Achashveirosh’s servants are fickle and opportunistic

Esther hopes to save the Jews by eliminating the true source of their problem, which is Achashveirosh, not Haman. Once Achashveirosh is eliminated, Haman automatically becomes disempowered and irrelevant.

individuals who are merely looking at ways to advance themselves and not to improve the wellbeing of the empire.

Thus, Hashem forces Esther to adopt the far less ambitious plan of simply eliminating Haman. This is a lesson for Jews in *Galut* (exile) and even today in Eretz Yisrael. We often seek overly ambitious plans that will solve our problems completely. Instead, Hashem wants us to follow the example of Raban Yochanan ben Zakai (*Gittin* 56a and 56b) who aspired simply to “*hatzala purta*,” a partial redemption. Instead of asking the Roman emperor to spare the Beit HaMikdash, he asked for Yavneh and its Yeshivah. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai feared that if he asked for the protection of the Beit HaMikdash, his request would be rebuffed. Thus, he believed that he stood a far better chance when requesting the far less ambitious proposal of maintaining Yavneh and the dynasty of Rabban Gamliel.

For example, some activists advocate the adoption of unwieldy and overly ambitious plans to overcome the problems of *igun* (withholding of a *get*), such as conditional marriages or conditional *gittin* issued at the time of marriage, which are fraught with halachic and practical problems. A more reasonable approach is to adopt the Rabbinical Council of America’s prenuptial agreement. While the RCA prenup is less ambitious and narrower in scope than the other approaches,

it is nonetheless dramatically more effective (and halachically acceptable). Similarly, I have seen communities that seek to implement very stringent practices in regard to their *eiruv*, which later become so unwieldy that they are not maintained at even a basic level of kashrut. Prudent pro-Israel advocacy groups adopt an analogous approach to lobbying Congress. It is pointless to promote overly ambitious legislation that has no chance of passing Congress (such as those in 2005 who quixotically lobbied Congress to oppose the Israeli government’s plan to withdraw from Gaza). When looking for a spouse, one should similarly not be overly ambitious but rather maintain reasonable expectations. There are countless examples in all areas of life.

A baseball analogy clarifies the message of our Gemara. A batter who aims to hit a home run may hit a home run, but he also runs a higher risk of striking out. Babe Ruth was for a very long time the all-time leading home run hitter, but he was also a leader in strikeouts. When a batter aims simply to hit a single, his chance of striking out is far less than if he were to aim to hit a home run.

The Lesson of Purim

Rav Tzadok HaKohein of Lublin (*Divrei Soferim* 32) notes that Pesach and Purim represent two different paradigms of redemption. The *Geulah* from Mitzrayim celebrated on Pesach was a complete redemption. Once

the Egyptian army was eliminated at the Yam Suf, we were completely liberated from Paroh. We were transformed, as we will soon state at the Seder, “*mei’afeilah le’orah*,” from darkness to light. Purim, on the other hand, represents survival in darkness. It teaches us that we can survive in darkness (i.e. *Galut*) even when complete redemption is not forthcoming in the near future.

Conclusion

We welcome Adar with joy, Rashi (*Ta’anit* 29a s.v. *Mi’shenichnas Adar*) explains, as it ushers in the season we celebrate the holidays of our redemption, Purim and Pesach. We begin our celebratory season thanking Hashem for the partial redemption of Purim and proceed to thank Hashem for the complete redemption of Pesach. In our times, Hashem has bestowed upon our people a partial redemption, as in the days of Purim, in the form of Medinat Yisrael. We anxiously await for Hashem to speedily bring forth a full redemption, similar to Pesach, with the arrival of the Mashiach.



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ROYALLY INSECURE

Ahashverosh had quite a lot. He held dominion over many lands and amassed tremendous wealth and many treasures, some of which he displayed to his banquet guests. He took council with many sages and once his orders were written and sealed, they became law. An outsider could have clearly observed that Ahashverosh had all that he desired. Upon close examination, however, it becomes apparent that despite his tremendous wealth, Ahashverosh was not the grand king he presented himself to be; he lacked self-confidence and moral integrity and was easily manipulated into permitting terrible evils to be committed under his authority. The



Megilla presents Ahashverosh as an example of the failure a person can become when status and outward appearance are cultivated at the expense of moral character and principles.

Why does Ahashverosh throw two banquets at the start of the Megilla? What purpose do they serve? First, the king likes to drink and indulge. He is interested in the pleasures of this world. He has a beautiful home, beautiful things, a gorgeous wife. Second, he is interested in what other people think. I can only imagine that people would have left the parties he threw moved by what their eyes beheld and grateful for their magnificent king. It seems, though, that his grandeur does not move beyond his physical possessions. The author of the Megilla hints at the king's insecurity. Ahashverosh needs the recognition of others. Perhaps he lacks confidence in himself and his

Maharal of Prague on Achashverosh's Anger

ויקצף המלך מאד וחמתו בערה בו. לפי הלשון לא הוה ליה למימר מאוד שהרי אחר כך אמר וחמתו בערה בו ... אבל בא לומר כי המלך קצף מאוד ואחר כך אמר וחמתו בערה בו כלומר כי מן השמים בא להבעיר חמתו ודומה כמו גחלים שמונחים לפניו ואין מעלין להם עד שיבא רוח ממקום אחר ונופח עד שמעלה להם וכן אחשוורוש קצף מאוד וגזירת השם יתברך היה מוציא הלהב אל הפעל... שכבר בארנו כי דבר זה היה התחלת הצלת ישראל ולכן דבר זה בא מלמעלה מן השם יתברך.

[The verse states] "The king was greatly angered and his rage burned within him." The way the verse is phrased, there was no need to say "me'od" (greatly) since it says afterward "his rage burned within him." Rather, this comes to teach that the king was greatly angered and only afterward did his rage burn within him, meaning that there was Divine intervention that caused his rage. This can be compared to coals that are spread out and don't produce a flame until a wind comes and blows on them to produce a flame. Similarly, Achashverosh was greatly angered and it was the decree from Hashem to produce the flame ... Because we have already explained that this was the beginning of the salvation of the Jewish people, and therefore this incident came from above, from Hashem.

Ohr Chadash 1:16

own kingship and therefore needs to show off to ensure that the residents of his kingdom do not rebel.

The king also seeks to show off his beautiful wife. On the seventh day of

the second banquet, when the king is "merry with wine," he requests that Vashti be brought before him in her crown (and perhaps nothing else as Hazal point out), "to display her beauty to the peoples and officials" (1:11) as if displaying a trophy. Vashti refuses to come. Consequently, the king "was greatly incensed and his fury burned within" (1:12). Instead of talking to his wife, he turns to his advisors and is convinced by the council of Memukhan to replace Vashti. Letters are immediately sent out to all the provinces in his kingdom noting that men wield authority in their homes and proclaiming that each household should speak the language of the man of the home.

The Gemara in *Masekhet Eruvin* 65b notes the following:

א"ר אילעאי בשלשה דברים אדם ניכר בכוסו ובכיסו ובכעסו.

Rabbi Elai said: In three matters a person's true character is ascertained; in his cup (i.e. his behavior when he drinks); in his pocket, (i.e. his conduct in his financial dealings with other people), and in his anger.

Ahashverosh is not impressive in any of the elements discussed by Rabbi Elai. Ahashverosh uses his wealth to throw lavish banquets in which he drinks too much, makes rash decisions, and acts upon his anger. Memukhan speaks and Ahashverosh follows without thinking.

At the start of Chapter Two, we learn that when the "king's anger subsided, he thought of Vashti and that which he decreed against her" (2:1). He regrets the decision he made in anger. Things quickly change after Ahashverosh determines that Esther will replace Vashti. He throws a banquet that at this point should not surprise readers. As the

narrative proceeds, the king promotes Haman, who becomes angered after Mordechai refuses to bow to him. Haman requests permission to obliterate this scattered and dispersed people, promising to pay a large sum of money to the royal treasury. In reaction to Haman's request, the king simply removes his ring and gives it to Haman, granting him permission to do whatever he pleases. The king once again is presented as an easily manipulated ignoramus who lacks any sense of morality. In fact, after the letters are sent out, the reader learns that, "The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was dumfounded" (3:15). Haman speaks and the king acts, and again no thinking involved.

Once informed of Haman's plans Esther decides to act. Interestingly, she does not request that the king kill Haman and annul his decree. Instead, she requests that the king and Haman come to a banquet that she makes for them. At that banquet, Esther asks that the two men come to another banquet she will make the next day. At first glance, we might question Esther's plan of action; why does she invite Haman to the banquets? Why were two banquets necessary? However, Esther understood Ahashverosh, and knew exactly what she was doing. The Gemara in *Masekhet Megilla* 15b, proposes many answers to why Esther invited Haman to the banquet, but only two answers are particularly relevant for us. The Gemara states:

רבי יהושע בן קרחה אומר אסביר לו פנים כדי שיהרג הוא והיא ... ר' אליעזר המודעי אומר קנאתו במלך קנאתו בשרים.

"Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korha says: She said to herself: I will act kindly toward him and thereby bring the king to suspect

that we are having an affair; she did so in order that both he and she would be killed. Additionally, Rabbi Eliezer HaModa'i says: She made the king jealous of him and she made the other ministers jealous of him [and in this way she brought about his downfall]."

Both explanations point to the fact that Esther understood that Ahashverosh could be easily swayed into thinking the worst. She wanted to cause suspicion and unrest. In such a state Ahashverosh could easily be stirred to punish Haman and even herself. As evident throughout the Megilla, Ahashverosh could be easily manipulated.

The author of the Megilla portrays how the kingship in the land of Persia operated. The king was insecure and fickle. Nothing could be trusted. Although Ahashverosh lived in a beautiful palace and possessed beautiful objects, his magnificence was limited to his possessions. If so, it should be no surprise that God's name does not appear in the Megilla. Why would God want to be associated with such a location? The author of

the Megilla wants us to consider our own lives. Is there more than meets the eye? Is there anything beneath the surface? What are our values and beliefs? Do our actions reflect our values?

Abraham serves as the prime antithesis to Ahashverosh. After rescuing Lot from Sedom and acquiring the booty of war, Melekh Sedom proposes that Abraham take the booty and he take the people; but interestingly, Abraham refuses to gain any personal benefit from the war. We are left wondering why Abraham turned down possessions that he rightfully acquired? Unlike Ahashverosh, who would have most likely accepted Melekh Sedom's proposal, Abraham was true to his values. He went to battle to save Lot, his nephew, not to acquire wealth. He had full faith that God would meet his needs. Additionally, Abraham wanted no connection or relationship with the evil king of Sedom and therefore rejected any affiliation with the evil he represented. Abraham was treading new ground. He had values

and principles that helped guide his decisions and his life. He did what was just and right, acting to save his family while placing belief in God at the forefront of his mind.

Before deciding to destroy Sedom, God says that He must inform Abraham about what He plans to do because He knows that Abraham will instruct His children to keep the way of God by doing what is just and right (*v'shamru derekh Hashem la'asot tzedakah umishpat*, Bereshit 18:19). Unlike Ahashverosh, God wants to connect Himself to Abraham and his offspring. As Abraham's descendants, when we have a clear set of values and a clear sense of self, we do not need to build walls and facades like Ahashverosh nor do we desire to flaunt our possessions or abilities. We will celebrate with equal joy our own achievements and those of others, motivating a society of retrospection and self-growth. Let us learn from the weakness of Ahashverosh to improve our own character traits and thereby contribute to the betterment of the world, one person at a time.



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COINS OF KAPPARAH

There were few things that Moshe did not know. In fact, the Gemara (*Menachos* 29a) records that there were only three things that Hashem needed to demonstrate to Moshe because of Moshe's lack of understanding: the intricacies of the Menorah, the image of the new moon that called for the declaration of Rosh Chodesh, and the exact *sheratzim* or crawling creatures that were deemed impure. Yet Rashi on Parshas Shekalim (*Shemos* 30:13) references the medrash (*Tanchuma* 9) that describes how Moshe was troubled by a coin! On the words “*zeh yitnu*” Rashi writes that Moshe was shown a coin of fire to demonstrate the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*. Tosafos (*Menachos* 29a and *Chullin* 42a) wonders why the shekel was not included in the original list. But more perplexing is how a simple coin joined the list of such complicated topics. What was too complex? What did Moshe not understand?



The *Shitah Mekubetztes* on *Menachos* comments that Moshe found it difficult to comprehend how a small coin could atone for the great sin of the golden calf. Indeed, it is hard to understand. What, then, is the answer?

There is another enigmatic Gemara about the *machatzis hashekel* that also requires explanation. The Gemara (*Megillah* 13b) writes that Hashem knew that Haman would pay *shekalim* to destroy Bnei Yisrael and as such, Hashem preempted Haman by

commanding the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*. When did Haman's *shekalim* become his “secret weapon” against the Jewish people? Furthermore, how could the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel* become Bnei Yisrael's first line of defense against destruction? What about this mitzvah was so special?

The medrash (*Shmos Rabbah* 41) comments that it was beautiful when Bnei Yisrael said the words “*naaseh venishma*” — “We will do and we will hear,” but it was quite the opposite when they said about the golden calf “*eileh elohecha Yisrael*” — “Israel, this is your god!” Why does the medrash juxtapose these two seemingly unrelated statements?

The *Beis Halevi*, *Mishpatim*, explains that the beauty of the statement of “*naaseh venishma*” was that it was in the plural; “**we** will do and **we** will hear.” Bnei Yisrael accepted the mitzvot upon themselves in a remarkable demonstration of unity as they took

responsibility for each other. The statement of “*eileh elohecha Yisrael*” was just the opposite. Even though many in Bnei Yisrael did not succumb to idol worship themselves, they turned to their neighbor and said, “this is **your** god!; not mine, but yours.” The sin of the golden calf was in fact the undoing of everything wonderful that had occurred when Bnei Yisrael said “*naaseh venishma*” as they shirked the responsibility that they should have had for their neighbors.

With this understanding we can perhaps understand how a coin could atone for such a sin. The Alshich, *Toras Moshe, Ki Sisa*, asks why we are charged with giving half a shekel. Why not give a full shekel? The Alshich explains that by giving half a shekel we demonstrate that the only way to be complete is with someone else’s half shekel. A Jew can only be complete with the help of another Jew.

This, in fact, is how a coin can atone for the sin of the golden calf. While the golden calf represented the epitome of a lack of unity, the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel* represents the necessity of Jews remaining as one.

With this, we can understand the Gemara in *Megillah* about our *shekalim* and Haman’s *shekalim*. Haman claimed that Bnei Yisrael were a nation that was “*mefuzar umeforad*” — scattered and divided. He understood that Bnei Yisrael suffered from a lack of unity, a problem that threatened their existence. Rava, in *Megillah* (13b), commented that this was the *lishna bisha*, or *lashon hara* that Haman used to prosecute Bnei Yisrael before Hashem. Esther, in response, declared that Mordechai should “*lech kenos es kol haYehudim* — go and gather all of the Jews together.” This reunification of the

people, coming together in teshuva and tefilla, is what saved Bnei Yisrael from Haman’s decree. Haman gave his *shekalim*, symbolic of Bnei Yisrael’s lack of unity, to encourage their destruction. Hashem preempted this by commanding the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*, which represented the ultimate unity of Bnei Yisrael.

The Gemara (*Shabbos* 88a) describes how Bnei Yisrael’s acceptance of the Torah on Har Sinai was “forced,” since the mountain was raised over their heads. However, Bnei Yisrael reaccepted the Torah during the days of Mordechai and Esther following the salvation of the Purim story. What specifically about the Purim story led to an acceptance of Torah? True, it was a joyful moment in history and one that demonstrated Hashem’s love for His nation. But why did that translate, now more than ever, into an acceptance of Torah like none other?

Perhaps the explanation is based on the above. If Purim was indeed a time of the reunification of Bnei Yisrael, as signified by the *shekalim*, then there was no greater time for acceptance of Torah. Just as on Har Sinai Bnei Yisrael were “*ke’ish echad belev echad*” — like one man with one heart — a prerequisite for the acceptance of Torah, so too here, the unification of Bnei Yisrael allowed for a new acceptance of Torah. The Vilna Gaon comments that the words in the *Megillah* (9:16), “*ve’amod al nafsham* — they stood up for their lives — is stated in the singular to demonstrate that they were “*beachdus gemura*” — in complete unity. On the *passuk* (9:23), “*Vekibel haYehudim*” — the Jews accepted — the Gaon comments again that the singular demonstrates “*shekulam kiblu ke’echad*” — they all accepted as one — a reference to

the unity at the original acceptance of Torah on Har Sinai. Bnei Yisrael’s original unity when they said “*naaseh venishma*,” which was lost when they said “*Eileh elohecha Yisrael*” by the sin of the golden calf, was recreated in the days of Purim allowing for a complete *kabalas haTorah*.

This demonstration of unity emphasized in the *Megillah* also explains the peculiar emphasis on the mitzvos of chessed on Purim. What do *matanos laevyonim* and *mishloach manos* have to do with Hashem’s salvation on Purim? There are other joyous days throughout the year when we are not commanded to perform similar mitzvos. Why are they appropriate here?

In the Nesivos’s commentary on the *Megillah*, *Megillas Setarim* (9:19), he explains that:

ואח"כ כששבו בתשובה שלימה נעשה אחדות ביניהם ונקהליו בעריהם וחיבבו זה את זה, ולזה אנו עושין ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו להורות שע"י החיבוב לחבירו בא הגאולה.

Afterward when they did complete teshuva there was complete unity and they gathered in their cities and they loved one another. And it is for this reason that we give mishloach manos each man to his friend, to demonstrate that because of this love for one’s friend, the salvation arrived.

Parshas Shekalim, the month of Adar, and the day of Purim are a time to remember that our secret to survival and success is the unity of Bnei Yisrael and our responsibility to encourage and inspire one another. Let us use the message of the *shekalim* and *mishloach manos* to reinforce this idea. In this way, we can recreate the unity felt at Har Sinai and on Purim so that our acceptance of Torah will be complete, and our service of Hashem can be *keish echad belev echad*.



THE SUBTLETY OF SILENCE: UNDERSTANDING MORDECHAI'S MOTIVATIONAL CHARGE

One of the greatest motivators toward action is the conviction that if we don't act, no one else will, and that success rests entirely upon our shoulders. Chazal teach precisely this in *Pirkei Avos* (2:5): “*B'makom she'ein anashim, hishtadel lihiyos ish* — in a place where there are no people [to take action], strive to be that person.”

And yet at one of the most critical moments in the Megillah's story, Mordechai seems to take a very different approach. When Esther learns of the fate of her people and still hesitates to approach the king, Mordechai is tasked with convincing Esther to move on their behalf. It would be the perfect opportunity to

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invoke Chazal's dictum of “*b'makom she'ein anashim*” (anachronistically, of course) and inspire Esther by reminding her that the entire fate of the Jewish people rests on her shoulders. What choice does she have? Yet, Mordechai takes the opposite approach:

כי אם-החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת--רוח
והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר ואף ובית-
אביך תאבדו; ומי יודע אם-לעת כזאת הנעת
למלכות.

For if you remain silent at this time, relief

and rescue will arise for the Jews from elsewhere, and you and your father's household will perish; and who knows whether you arrived at royalty for this very moment?

Esther 4:14

The speech feels woefully inadequate and uninspiring. Why would Esther feel compelled to risk her life when salvation would come either way? Doesn't that render any potential action utterly meaningless? Yet somehow, it works. Esther acts. What was Mordechai trying to convey and what ultimately inspired Esther to take charge?

We may need to reimagine what Mordechai really intends to convey

R. Shlomo Alkabetz on Mordechai's Argument to Esther

ואמר מי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות כי ממך ומינך תקח הראייה שעליה למדרגת המלוכה פתאום שלא כנוהג העולם שאינם עולים למדרגה כזאת אלא בהדרגה ואת לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות בהשגחה פרטית כמו ליוסף הצדיק וכן ג"כ יהיה לישראל ריוח והצלה פתאום ממקום אחר ... ופירוש ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת להראותך כה ההשגחה הפתאומית הגעת למלכות.

He said, "Who knows if you attained the crown for a moment like this?" Because from your experience you should know. You rose to royalty instantly, not like the natural rise to royalty, which involves many steps. You rose to a moment like this through Divine providence just like Yosef HaTzaddik, and the same will be true of the Jewish people — success and salvation will come suddenly from another place ... The explanation of "Who knows if you attained the crown for a moment like this?" is to teach you the power of Divine providence that enabled you to attain royalty instantly.
Manot HaLevi 4:14

with this speech, and it starts with an insight I learned from my *rebbe*, R. David Fohrman, regarding the particular language that Mordechai invokes. "*Hachareish tacharishi*" ([For if] you remain silent) is quite a peculiar phrase. That particular formulation — the tense (*hiphil*), together with the double language — appears but one other time in all of Tanakh.

While discussing the laws of vows, the Torah says that when a married woman makes a vow, "*ishah yikimenu*

v'ishah yifeirenu — her husband can either affirm or annul it" (Bamidbar 30:14). Both of those verbs — affirmation and nullification — are *active*. But what if the husband does neither? What if he hears the vow but doesn't actively affirm or annul?

ואם-הִחָרַשׁ יְחָרִישׁ לָהּ אִשָּׁה מִיּוֹם אֶל-יוֹם וְהָקִים אֶת-כָּל-נִדְרֶיהָ אוֹ אֶת-כָּל-אַסְרֶיהָ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיהָ הָקִים אֹתָם, כִּי-הִחָרַשׁ לָהּ בְּיוֹם שָׁמָעוֹ.
But if her husband is altogether silent from day to day, then he causes all her vows to stand, or all her bonds which are upon her — he has let them stand, because he held his peace at her in the day that he heard them.

Bamidbar 30:15

The Torah adamantly argues that there is no third option at all. Silence is tacit agreement.¹ Indeed, the S'forno on this *pasuk* says precisely this:

שהשתיקה במי שיש בידו למחות היא כמו הודאה שהשותק הוא כמסכים במה שנעשה.
Silence by one who has the ability to protest is akin to agreement, for one who is silent is as one who agrees with that which was done.

This double language of "*hachareish tacharishi*," then, is what we might call a "deafening silence." Willful stillness when one could, conceivably, speak up is not abstention but a screaming affirmation. In fact, the grammatical tense of these words — *hiphil*, which is often used to portray causation in active voice — points to exactly this idea. Yes, silence is technically passive, but in many cases, it is akin to active choice.

With all this in mind, let's return to Mordechai's speech. By borrowing the language of "*hachareish tacharishi*" from the parshah of *nedarim*, Mordechai was appealing not to Esther's leadership or the community's dependence on her,

but to her moral responsibility. Was salvation dependent on Esther? Perhaps not. God certainly didn't *need* Esther. But that's neither here nor there. Mordechai was saying: "Esther, now that you know of Haman's plan and you have the opportunity to act, there are only two options: You can affirm Haman's plan, or you can stand up against it. And '*im hachareish tacharishi*' — if you remain silent, it's — in the words of the S'forno — *k'maskim b'mah shena'aseh* — as if you agree with it." As R. Aharon Lichtenstein puts it, "Esther must make her fateful choice: Do I care or don't I?" (*By His Light*).

This approach clarifies two other strange elements of the Megilah's story. First, Mordechai's speech has yet another ostensibly uninspiring line: If you don't act, salvation will come from somewhere else, "*v'at u'beis avicha toveidun* — you and your father's household will perish." Why would that be true? Granted, lack of action would not have been ideal, but if salvation of the Jewish nation were to come, why would Esther and her family — proud, card-carrying members of the Jewish nation — not be included in that *yeshuah*? But when the lens gets shifted from communal dependence to moral responsibility, it makes perfect sense: If Esther were to remain silent and thereby affirm the genocidal plan, she would remove herself from the Jewish camp and firmly place herself in Haman's. Naturally, she would become susceptible to suffering precisely Haman's fate — which, as the Megilah describes, was the downfall of him and his household. It's not a punishment but a natural consequence.

Second, the very name of the holiday might well point exactly to

this newfound understanding of Mordechai's approach. We generally understand Purim to be from the word "pur," lots, just as the Megilah itself expresses (9:26). But there may be a double meaning here. Back in Bamidbar, the verb used for "annul" (of a vow) is "hefer" (הפּר). The Radak, R. Dovid Kimchi, in his *Sefer HaShorashim*, writes that the root of *hefer* is "פור." Then, remarkably, he writes that Purim ("פורים") comes from precisely the same root. In other words, Purim may not only be referring to Haman's tool of destruction, but to Esther's courageous decision *not* to remain silent, to actively annul Haman's decree.²

This whole approach, it seems to me, is reminiscent of — or, more precisely, the precursor to — a fascinating insight of R. Bachya ibn Paquda in *Chovos HaLevavos* (*Sha'ar Avodas Ha'Elokim*, 4). There, he notes that we generally divide human activity into three categories: required (things we must do), prohibited (things we cannot do), or permissible (things we are allowed but not required to do). But R. Bachya points out that this third category is actually a phantom category. In truth, there is nothing that we're simply "allowed" to do. For every "*reshus*," we must deeply

consider whether we should or should not be doing that particular thing in that moment. And that process is complex and far from clear-cut; there are countless factors to consider — timing, context, people, and more. Ultimately, if we decide that it would be best to do that thing, it leaves the realm of "allowed" and enters the realm of "must." And if we decide that it's best *not* to do it, then it is "prohibited." I don't believe R. Bachya means that those permissible things are actually *legally* required or prohibited, but, just as Mordechai reminded Esther, every potential to act has complexity and both acting and choosing not act are active moral decisions.

Of course, life is not black and white, and I spend a tremendous amount of time teaching my students to think in more nuanced and less binary models. Still, Mordechai is teaching two profound lessons that deeply reverberate with me and challenge me to take real pause as I encounter subtlety in the world. First, abstention where there is an opportunity to intervene, in many cases, serves as implicit affirmation — and we are responsible for those decisions. And, when we feel that we should not or cannot act, we must ask ourselves, in

the words of R. Aharon, "How much of our resignation is motivated by supposed 'inability' and how much is a result of the fact that our concern simply doesn't run deep enough?" Second, when it comes to moral development, the real challenge is to be able to see nuance and subtlety — to notice the challenges and merits of various positions all at once — and to still have the wisdom and clarity to make difficult decisions. I don't mean to argue that Haman's genocidal decree had nuance, but that the situation in which Esther found herself was replete with complexity — and, ultimately, her ability to choose instead of passively observe made her the catalyst of Jewish survival.

Endnotes

1. Based on the pasuk's language of "*miyom el yom*," this period — when silence turns into affirmation — seems to be once that day passes and nightfall arrives (Rashi, conclusion of *Nedarim* 76b).
2. At least two factors contribute to justifying a second meaning of "Purim" beyond Haman's lots: First, it is quite strange to name a holiday after the tool that would have been the nation's end. Second, a close reading of the Megilah's description of the holiday's name implies that Esther's action and God's salvation (9:25) also contributed to the holiday's name, in addition to the lots themselves (9:24).

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THE GREAT GATSBY AND PURIM

Just by chance (if anything can be considered “chance” in the Purim season), my American Literature class happens to read *The Great Gatsby* around Purim time each year, and the connections between the two stories are hard to ignore. Both are set in wine-splashed palaces of excess, and both are ultimately searing indictments of the hedonistic cultures they describe. In these cultures, after all, the main characters feel they must parade around in masks — Gatsby, a self-made man from a poor family, feels he must masquerade as “old money” to fit in; Esther is a furtive Jewess who cannot reveal her faith in her role as Persian queen. And in these cultures, too, the parties feature



endless streams of nameless, faceless, guests whose private identities don’t matter as long as their eyes confer conspicuity on their hosts’ consumption. Achashverosh “gave a banquet for all the officials and

courtiers — the administration of Persia and Media, the nobles and the governors of the provinces in his service, as he *displayed* the wealth of his kingdom” (Esther 1:3-4). At Gatsby’s parties, “People were not invited — they went there... sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all, came for the party...” (Fitzgerald 45).

Most terribly, in these hedonistic cultures, this namelessness and facelessness can end in the horror of murder. Achashverosh is all too willing to get rid of his wife and replace her via lottery — any woman can potentially fill the role — and he is equally willing to sentence his most trusted advisor to death upon one

accusation; he'll get another one. And, of course, he carelessly throws his ring to Haman to do as he pleases with a whole nation of faceless people. Who is in the courtyard to advise tonight? It doesn't matter. Send whoever it is in! In *The Great Gatsby*, the same is true. The wealthy and arrogant Tom Buchanan leaves his mistress dead on the road when he realizes he might be implicated in the crime, and when Gatsby is murdered at the end, none of his wealthy new "friends" even bother to attend the funeral. To these immorally wealthy characters, people — even friends and loved ones — are only means to an end, and can be disposed of the moment they become inconvenient.

Both the author of the Megillah and F. Scott Fitzgerald, then, do not shy away from blaming the materialistic rich for their own problems and the problems of the world. And yet, in *Gatsby*, there is something interesting. The wealthy are not the only ones to blame. Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald's unassuming narrator from the Midwest, finds himself Gatsby's neighbor one summer. Even as Nick claims to loathe Gatsby, "who represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn" (Fitzgerald 4), he can't help but become transfixed by him. Nick thinks that "there was something gorgeous about him" (ibid.), and spends much of his summer observing and wondering about Gatsby. The wealthy in the novel are guilty of terrible indulgence, to be sure, but by themselves, are only a corrupt few. It is their less wealthy admirers who create a culture out of them. The wealthy are guilty of consumption, yes, but it is the less wealthy — the foreigners visiting from more modest places — who make that consumption conspicuous by laying their eyes upon

it with wonder. After all, without Nick, would Gatsby's story have even been told at all?

Interestingly, the Talmud seems to imply that the Jewish people were not unlike Nick Carraway in this sense. They, too, were foreigners from a more modest and understated environment. And, though the story of Purim is usually conceptualized as a typical tale of anti-Semitism, the Talmud in *Megillah* 12a strangely places some of the blame on the Jews themselves:

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.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai's students asked him, "For what reason were the Jews of that generation (i.e., the generation in which the Purim story took place) deserving of destruction?" He answered, "You tell me the answer." They replied, "Because they participated in the banquet of the evil (Achashverosh)."

**Achashverosh's
repugnant lifestyle
by itself was one
thing. But it was the
participation of so
many of his subjects
— especially the ones
who were supposed
to be more innocent
and more devout —
that transformed his
personal lifestyle into a
culture.**

Does such a sin, merely "participating in the banquet of Achashverosh," merit complete and total destruction? What could this passage from the Talmud mean? Perhaps it is similar to what Fitzgerald implies about Nick. Achashverosh's repugnant lifestyle by itself was one thing. But it was the participation of so many of his subjects — especially the ones who were supposed to be more innocent and more devout — that transformed his personal lifestyle into a culture. Similarly, Achashverosh's desire to show off his wealth was bad enough on its own. But conspicuous consumers like he and Haman, just like Gatsby, needed the admiring eyes of others like fires need oxygen to burn. Achashverosh needed everyone to see Vashti — it wasn't enough that he was married to her. Haman needed others to look up at him and say, "This is what shall be done for a person whom the king admires" (Esther 6:9). The Jewish people, by participating in the "banquet of evil," were Nick's eyes on Gatsby — making consumption conspicuous and gluttony admirable. In their fascination and participation in his banquet, the Jewish people unwittingly lent Achashverosh power, the same power that he ironically, but not surprisingly, almost used to destroy them.

Which is why it makes so much sense that Esther and Mordechai are the saviors of the Purim story. Esther — whose very name means hiddenness — is quite literally dipped in the oils and excess of the kingdom for twelve months, but remains unchanged. Esther's defining feature, when she is finally called for her night with the king, is "*lo biksha davar*" (Esther 2:15), she did not ask for a thing. And yet, despite never asking, never looking to be looked at, she is,

R. Eliezer Ashkenazi on Achashverosh Flaunting His Wealth

והתועלת הנמשך מן הכתוב הזה לענין
הסיפור שכל אשר נתן בלבו להתגאות
ולתכבד ולהראות גדולתו והיותו ראוי
למלכות ההוא כן הכבוד ברח ממנו
ונתבזה שאשתו מרדה בו עד שלסבה
זאת נתיירא שמא יתבזה בעיני מלכים
ושרים וימרדו בו.

The role of this verse in the story is to tell us that the more [Achashverosh] tried to elevate and honor himself, and show off his greatness and his royal worthiness, honor evaded him and he was disgraced. His wife rebelled against him to the extent that he had to worry that he would be disgraced by the princes and officers and they would rebel against him [if he didn't punish her].

Yosef Lekach 1:4

ironically “noseyt chayn be’eyney kol roehah” (Esther *ibid.*)— pleasing to all who look at her, particularly Achashverosh. Perhaps someone unadorned, to him, was the most exotic of all: Esther — who at first is too shy, too humble to come before the king. Esther — who does not make her big request on the first occasion, but only the second. Esther — who has no parents, no legacy to speak of — the orphaned queen. Esther — whose name hints to the true Savior of the day, The One Who is never seen at all.

And Mordechai, who takes Haman’s fantasy and turns it on its head. Haman wanted to ride through the streets and have everyone look at him and shout his glory. The energy would all be flowing in his direction. Mordechai, in a twist of fate that

could only happen in a kingdom where individuals don’t matter and facelessness reigns supreme, ends up being the one to ride into the streets of Shushan, victorious, and in the king’s garb, but no one shouts anything before him. Instead, “*veha’ir Shushan tzahala vesameacha; layehudim haytah orah v’simcha vi’sasson v’yikar*” (Esther 8:15-16) — the Jewish people rejoice. The energy of his moment flows outward, to the people — Mordechai’s celebration is only significant as an emblem of their own. And this is how the Megillah ends: “*ki Mordechai hayehudi ... doresh tov l’amo vi’dover shalom lechol zaro*” (Esther 10:3). Mordechai always sought out the good of his people and spoke peace to everyone. His leadership was not about himself, but about others.

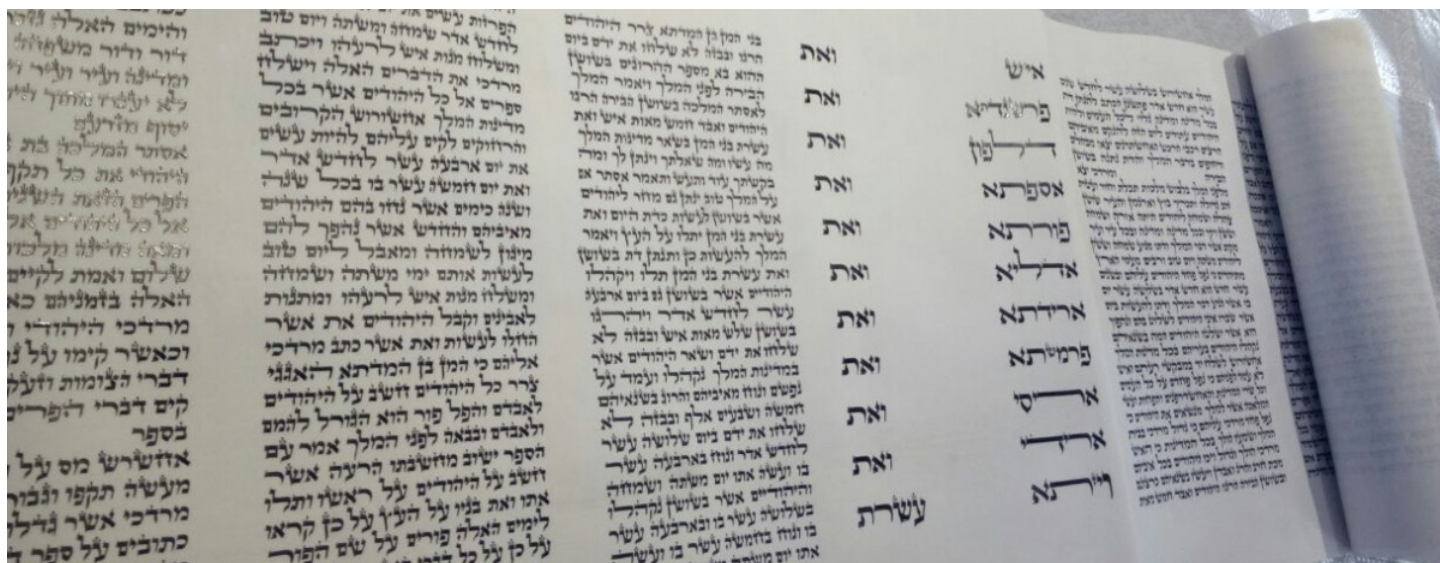
Rabbi Pini Dunner explains that this same redirection of energy — outward instead of inward — is the reason behind the mitzvot of Purim day. At the end of the Megillah, the Jews are victorious, and suddenly have money and power. Rabbi Dunner explains that they are faced with a choice: they could “revel and party, or turn their success into an opportunity to share, to become God’s partners in His material world by thanking God through using that material world.” They choose the latter — to give *mishloach manot* and *matanot l’evyonim*. “Ahasuerus’s parties and fondness for self-serving materialism are offset by the Jewish reaction: turning material success into a vehicle for spirituality and Godliness,” Rabbi Dunner writes. The Jewish people redeem themselves at the end of the story. They transform from a people who were fanning the flames of consumption to a charitable nation who give their own wealth to others.

And with this redirection, we head into Pesach — that holiday of modest beginnings, of basics, of flattened egos and flattened bread. Purim, of course, is also “*shloshim yom kodem lachag*”— thirty days before Pesach, when we are supposed to start learning its laws. And Purim leaves us in just the right mindset to do so, as it re-teaches the life-threatening dangers of materialism, while at the same time providing the role models and tools to reorient away from it. Purim leaves us right off where we need to be in order to perceive The One Whose face was hidden in the Megillah, but Who emerges into such broad daylight in *yetziat mitzrayim* that even a “*shifcha al hayam*,” a maidservant on the seas, couldn’t misperceive it (Rashi, Exodus 15:2). Stripped bare of cloaking drapery and regal garb, of excess and distraction, the curtains of the Yam Suf can part so that the essential becomes visible, and we can say “*zeh Keili vi’anvehu*” (Exodus 15: 2) — this is my God, and I will enshrine Him.

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GRAND DRESS AND DELUSIONS OF GRANDEUR IN MEGILLAT ESTHER

In “On Account of a Hat,” Sholem Aleichem tells the story of a Jewish businessman named Sholem Shachnah.¹ We meet Sholem at the train station in Zolodievka, as he waits to catch the train that will take him home for Passover. He realizes with trepidation that the only open seat in the station is next to a sleeping Russian official, who Sholem nicknames “Buttons” due to his uniform. The prospect of sitting next to this official terrifies Sholem, but he is exhausted and so he reluctantly does sit down. Feeling himself drifting off, Sholem pays a Russian peasant to wake him up when the train arrives. A short time later, Sholem awakes on his own to find a long line forming. Panicking that he will miss his train, he jumps up and rushes to the ticket



FUCHS MIZRACHI SCHOOL

line and, in his haste, he accidentally grabs the hat of the Russian official instead of his own. Unknowingly wearing the wrong hat, Sholem is amazed to be treated with deference by all around him — he is even given a first-class cabin! When Sholem finally catches a glimpse of himself, he curses the peasant: “Twenty times did I tell him to wake me...and what does he do, that dumb ox, may he catch cholera in his face, but wake up the official instead! And me he leaves asleep on

the bench!” Sholem, convinced that he is actually the Russian official and that the real Sholem is still asleep in the Zolodievka train station, jumps off the train and goes back to the station, missing Passover at home.

In reducing the identities of Jews and Russians to mere clothing, this story skewers the anti-Semitism rampant in early 20th-century Russia. Leora Batnitsky, in *How Judaism Became a Religion*, notes that the humor of the story stems from “the underlying assumption that it would be absurd to think that a Jew could be mistaken for a Russian official. In fact, the only imaginable relationship between Jews and Russian officialdom...is the tremendous fear that Sholem Shachnah exhibits toward Buttons.”²

Sholem Aleichem wrote this story in 1913. Batnitsky points out that only two years earlier, in Kiev, Menachem Mendel Beilis was accused of murdering a Ukrainian boy and using his blood to make matzah. And even though Beilis' lengthy trial ended with an acquittal in 1913, the incident itself was not soon forgotten. A Jewish reader in this period would finish the story with a sense of trepidation. Shachnah is stuck in Zolodievka for Passover, and without the official's hat, Shachnah is defenseless against the ever-present anti-Semitism of his society.

"On Account of a Hat" emphasizes the tenuous position of the Jewish characters by using costume changes to represent status changes. Megillat Esther does the same. In the Megillah, what is easily slipped on can just as easily be stripped off. Costumes cannot form a real defense against anti-Semitism.

The first perek of the Megillah reports that Vashti, a queen with apparently impeccable royal lineage,³ was called to pay obeisance through wearing her "royal diadem." Refusing to do so, Vashti is stripped of her status and removed. Esther ultimately replaces her: "So [the king] set a royal diadem (*keter malchut*) on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (Esther 2:17). Never mind her carefully withheld lineage, it seems Esther's transition to queenship consists entirely of a few months soaking in myrrh, some cosmetics, and, as the crescendo, having the royal diadem placed on her head. Despite the apparent significance of the diadem though, Esther is well aware that it does not confer any real power, as she explains to Mordechai in chapter four. She could be put to death, she points

out, for visiting the king without a proper summons — diadem or not.

After hearing of Haman's plans for eliminating the Jews in the kingdom, "Mordechai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes" (Esther 4:1). Esther "was greatly agitated" (Esther 4:4), though the cause of her agitation is left ambiguous. Is she reacting to the news of the decree, or to Mordechai's unbecoming garb? In any event, she sends a change of clothing to Mordechai so that he may enter the palace gates. The absurdity of this gesture is not lost on Mordechai, who declines the clothing knowing that changing his clothes cannot change the horror of the Jews' situation. Mordechai charges Esther to make a stand and confront the king: "Perhaps you have attained your royal position (*malchut*) for just such a crisis" (Esther 4:14).

In the Megillah, what is easily slipped on can just as easily be stripped off. Costumes cannot form a real defense against anti-Semitism.

The word *malchut* in this context refers to Esther's change in status, her royal position she can now use to her advantage. Earlier, this word referred to the royal diadem that was transferred from Vashti to Esther. As Esther prepares herself to go to the king and reveal her true identity, the text emphasizes the communal prayer, the climactic three-day wait, and, finally, Esther's royal attire: (*vatilbash Esther malchut*, Esther 5:1).

The dual use of the word *malchut* in the Megillah underscores the facade of power that both Mordechai and Esther acknowledge as they nervously undertake their plan to counter Haman's influence.

The bizarre significance that characters in the Megillah afford to clothing resurfaces in the next chapter. Ahashversosh seeks Haman's advice for devising an appropriate repayment for someone to whom the king owes a favor. Haman, not realizing that the king is seeking to reward Mordechai, suggests that "the attire and the horse be put in the charge of one of the king's noble courtiers..." (Esther 6:9). Ahashverosh happily accepts this plan. But what possible honor could the royal costume confer upon someone publicly recognized as Mordechai ha-Yehudi, when the fate of the Jewish people has already been decided? This episode serves to expose, in a particularly stark manner, the superficiality of the kingdom and the illusion of power (or perhaps the power of illusion) in the court.

This point is emphasized yet again when Haman's decree is overturned. Before describing the communal joy, the Megillah emphasizes Mordechai's royal clothing and newfound status: "Mordechai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries" (Esther 8:15).

The use of clothing to represent status changes again highlights the superficial nature of these changes. Mordechai and Esther seem to attain positions of high status at the end of the Megillah, yet, by now, we are familiar with the precarious nature of status in Ahashverosh's court.

So is the ending of Megillat Esther truly happy? Is there any reason the Jews of Shushan and throughout the kingdom can be confident that this will not happen again? Mordechai and Esther's positions of power are as tenuous as those of Vashti and Haman; in this corrupt, superficial court, they are just a costume change away from another calamity. They are Sholem Shachnah, but in royal Persian garb instead of a Russian uniform. And, as is the case for Sholem Aleichem's story, appreciating the historical context can help us understand the deeper message of the Megillah.

Professor Yonatan Grossman⁴ asserts that the specificity of the opening of Megillat Esther, "It was in the days of Achashverosh" (Esther 1:1), demands that we view the story in its historical context. Grossman notes that the vast majority of scholars identify Achashverosh with the Achaemenid king Xerxes, who ruled from 485–465 BCE. In mentioning that Mordechai was the grandson of Kish, who was exiled from Judea (Esther 2:6), the Megillah appears to open in the shadow of the destruction of the First Temple. Yet identifying Achashverosh with Xerxes would place this story at the very beginning of the Second Temple Era. Consequently, it seems the Jews in Shushan mentioned in the Megillah chose to remain in Shushan, and did not join the rebuilding of the Second Temple.

The book of Ezra describes

the faltering efforts to rebuild the Temple and Jewish life in Jerusalem. The returning Jews are humble in stature and few in number. Shushan, in contrast, sparkles with pomp and glitter. The Megillah's emphasis on costume changes, however, points to the superficiality of that society and underscores its danger. Violence and chaos can only partially hide behind a veneer of order and stability in Shushan, but they never completely disappear. Megillat Esther begs us to consider a number of questions: What would it look like if Jews could define their own destiny, in their own land, without the need to hide their identity? What does humble and authentic leadership look like? Megillat Esther begs the Jews of Shushan return home and be true to themselves. Otherwise, they consign their fate to the whims of a superficial, capricious, and uncertain society.

Endnotes

1. "On Account of a Hat" translated by Isaac Rosenfeld, from *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories*, Revised Edition. Copyright 1989.
2. Batnitzky, Leora, *How Judaism Became a Religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton University Press, 2011), 139-141.
3. See *Esth. Rabbah* 3:5; *Esth. Rabbah* 3:14; BT *Megillah* 12b.
4. Grossman, Yonatan. "Timeframe and Chronology in Megillat Esther." The Israel Koschitsky Virtual Beit Midrash, available at: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/shiur-02-timeframe-and-chronology-chapter-1>.

R. Moshe Chagiz on the Custom of Wearing Costumes on Purim

נלע"ד בנתינת הטעם למה לא נהגו מנהג זה של לבישת הפרצופים כי אם דוקא בימים ההם ובזמן זה ... כי הימים הללו נזכרים ונעשים זכר לדבר האלקי רשב"י ז"ל שאמר לתלמידיו כששאלו לו וכי משוא פנים יש בדבר א"ל הם לא עשו אלא לפנים אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהן אלא לפנים דומה בדומה ללבשת הפרצופים שמשנים צורות פניהם לצורות משונות ויתנכרו איש אל רעהו מכח אותו פרצוף אמנם לובשי הפרצופין עצמן מכירין זה את זה וכל אחד יודע מה שבלב חברו המלוה עמו ונמצא שאותו שינוי אינו אלא לפנים כי כל אחד כדקאי קאי דומה בדומה למה שאירע לאבותינו בהשהחיותם לצלם שהם לא עשו אלא לפנים מראה ולבם היה לשמים ואף הקב"ה בשר להם בתורתו ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני דומה ללבשת הפרצוף שמסתיר פניו מחבירו אמנם לב שניהם שווה ומכירין זה את זה.

In my humble opinion, the reason we only wear costumes during this time (i.e. Purim) is because these days commemorate the words of the holy R. Shimon bar Yochai, whose students asked (Megillah 12a): was there favoritism shown to the Jews of Shushan [who according to R. Shimon received their decree because they worshipped idols]? R. Shimon answered that because they only worshipped idols in appearance (not out of belief), Hashem only decreed against them in appearance (He really didn't intend to destroy them). This idea can be compared to people wearing costumes — the costume-wearers may not be recognizable to others, but they themselves know who they are underneath as well as their friends accompanying them (i.e. those who friends who have disclosed which costumes they are wearing). The costumes are only a change in appearance, not of essence. This is similar to what happened to our ancestors when they worshipped the idols — they only did so out of fear, but their hearts were toward the heavens. The Holy One Blessed be He even said in the Torah, "And I will hide My face," which can also be compared to a costumed masquerader hiding his face, while his inner thoughts remain the same.

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When the Megillah first introduces Mordechai, it singles him out as a Jew. In fact, until Mordechai is introduced, there is no mention of the Jewish people living in Shushan. Our knowledge of the Jewish people in Shushan comes from the Gemara and the midrashim, which teach us that the Jewish people sinned by attending the party of Achashverosh.

The *Sfas Emes* Purim 5641, points out that the introduction to Mordechai is a little strange. Before the Megillah tells us how he arrives in Shushan, it says: “There was a Jew and his name was Mordechai” (2:5). Only after this does the Megillah explain that Mordechai wound up in Shushan because he was exiled along with



Yechonya. Aside from Mordechai's amazing relationship with Esther, the Megillah does not give us insight into his relationship with the other Jews that he was in exile with. Mordechai seems to spend his time sitting at the gates of the palace, but we are

never told how Mordechai manages to inspire the Jewish people to do teshuva and to accept the Torah.

The Sfas Emes points out several important insights that help us understand some of the decisions made by Mordechai and Esther throughout the story. The Sfas Emes suggests (based on a midrash *Esther Rabbah* 6:4) that following the original battle of Amalek in Refidim, Hashem promised the Jewish people that as long as they were united, Amalek would have no power over them. This is different than our typical understanding of “*Hakol kol Yaakov vehayadayim yedei Eisav* — The voice is that of Yaakov but the hands are those of Eisav.” Chazal (*Eicha Rabbah*, *Pesicha*) teach us that as long as Bnei

Yisrael are involved in the study of Torah and Avodas Hashem, Eisav has no power over us. This promise, however, also states that Amalek has no power over the Jews when they are united.

When Haman rose to power, it was clearly important to him that everyone respect and acknowledge his power. Haman was desperate to feed his ego and have people bow down to him. When Mordechai refused, Haman acts in a way that appears to be completely irrational and arguably worse than any other anti-Semite in history. One Jew not bowing down to Haman made him want to kill every Jewish man, woman and child in the kingdom of Achashverosh. Why? What did Haman see that was so egregious?

Haman saw a Jew. One Jew. Not one of the rowdy, boisterous Jews who were enjoying the party of Achashverosh, but a Jew quietly going about his business. The Megillah (2:11) tells us that Mordechai checked on Esther every single day because she was an orphan and he was responsible for her. Every day for what was likely four or five years, Mordechai checked in on Esther. Mordechai was the ultimate mensch. He was also completely dedicated to the king, as is proven when he unraveled the plot of Bigsan and Seresh. But Mordechai was alone. He was just one Jew.

Haman recognized an opportunity. Haman was from Amalek and recognized that the only time he could fulfil his purpose of wiping out the Jewish people was when the Jews were not united. Right after Haman saw Mordechai, he did not go to Achashverosh and complain that Mordechai wasn't bowing down. He doesn't try to say that Mordechai is perhaps going to lead a coup against

Achashverosh, similar to what we see in Sefer Shemos when Pharaoh decides to enslave the Jewish people. Haman runs over to Achashverosh and he says that the Jewish people are "*mefuzar umeforad — scattered and dispersed*" (3:8). What kind of a reason would this possibly be to kill out an entire nation?

Haman is not only trying to appeal to Achashverosh, he is appealing to Hashem. Chazal teach us that throughout the entire Megillah there are allusions to Hashem, but Hashem is not mentioned outright. Haman is trying to appeal to Hashem by saying that the Jewish people are divided and scattered. This, Haman tells Hashem, is his opportunity to kill them, because He promised that as long as the Jewish people are not united, Amalek has power over them.

When Mordechai learns of Haman's plot to kill the Jewish people, the Megillah uses very important and purposeful language: "*vayashav Mordechai el Shaar Hamelech — Mordechai returned to the gates of the king*" (6:12). The Gemara in *Megilla* 16a, points out that the word *vayashav* can also have the connotation of *teshuva* — repentance. Why did Mordechai feel the need to do teshuva? He had done nothing wrong. He did not attend the party. He did not bow down to idols. He was a tzaddik.

The answer lies in the fact that Mordechai recognized exactly what Haman was trying to do. Mordechai approaches Esther and in the most dramatic line in the Megillah acknowledges that Hashem will save the Jewish people in some way, but it's up to Esther to decide what her place would be in this story. Esther's reaction is an immediate turnaround.

Esther tells Mordechai right away, "Go gather the Jewish people" (4:16). Salvation of the Jewish people was always going to come from the unification of the Jewish people.

All of the mitzvos of Purim lend themselves to the unification of the Jewish people: Giving baskets of food, giving charity, feasting with our family and friends and the reading of the Megillah. Indeed, the reading of the Megillah should be done in shul with many people because of "*b'rov am hadras Melech*." Of course, we want all our mitzvos and rituals to be publicized, but none more than the reading of the Megillah, where the whole message is that when we come together, Amalek has no power over us. This is why, after reading the Megillah, we say "*birosam yachad techeiles Mordechai — when they saw together the techeles of Mordechai*."

Recently, the Jewish people witnessed an incredible unification through the various Siyumei Hashas all over the world. The *achdus* that was felt everywhere was incredible. When Bnei Yisrael came together in the Purim story, they accepted the Torah from Hashem out of love and not out of fear. When the Jewish people gather together for positive reasons, it undoubtedly inspires so many of us to reaffirm our commitment to Hashem and Toras Chaim. May we all experience this Purim ***beyachad*** in order to bring the *binyan Beis Hamikdash*.



THE MEGILAH TIMES

Masechet Megilah opens with an unusual division of the Purim celebration:

מגילה נקראת בי"א בי"ב בי"ג בי"ד בט"ו.
Megilat Ester is read on the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 15th [of Adar].

Why are there are so many days of Purim, and why is this enigmatic halacha chosen to open the Masechet?

Megilat Ester itself sets two dates for the observance of Purim (9:21): All walled cities read the Megilah on the 15th to commemorate the miraculous victory of the Jews of Shushan, which was celebrated on that day in Shushan. Cities that are not walled celebrate on the 14th, the date that Jews in the rest of the empire celebrated their victories.

Why must this celebration be bifurcated? Why don't we all celebrate

RAMAZ
ישיבת רמז

on the 15th, when the war was completed for everyone, regardless of the exact times of the individual battles?

The Mishna teaches that the halacha further divided this holiday and established a different date for people who live in the suburbs. This is because these communities had difficulty gathering a minyan or a person to read Megilah. Therefore, they were able to read on “market day,” that is, the Monday or Thursday prior to Purim, which can be as early

as the 11th. This is alluded to in the Megilah, which instructs us to read the Megilah “*bizmanehem*” (in their times), indicating multiple times (9:31). Thus, the Megilah is read on any of five different days depending on the community.

The unity surrounding the Jewish calendar is nearly miraculous. Given the disparity of views on almost every issue in our religion, it is a marvel that all Jews celebrate all the Jewish holidays on all of the same days, regardless of which country of origin they descend from. Thus, it is striking that we disunify ourselves by design on this particular holiday.

The themes of unity and diversity are not apparent on the surface of the story, but are noted by many commentators. Haman called

attention to the fact that the Jewish people are a “nation that is spread out and scattered among the nations” (3:8) when he suggested their annihilation to Achashverosh. When Ester began to lead her resistance, she instructed Mordechai to “go and gather all the Jews” (4:16) in a unified way. This subtle allusion to the growing unity at that time seems to highlight a most fundamental element of the Jewish experience: when we are faced with an anti-Semitic attempt to annihilate us, we demonstrate the strength of our unified identity. Haman might have mistakenly thought that the Jews who peppered the kingdom saw themselves as individuals who had little in common with each other, and who would not stand up for one another. He may have calculated that in each neighborhood his army could strike the few Jewish residents. He later discovered that an attack on one would be seen as an attack on us all; his threat in any one of the 127 countries would be of concern to all Jews, including the Queen. This miscalculation led to his demise and the victory of the Jewish people.

Purim is linked to Shavuot as the day of the affirmation of the acceptance of the Torah (*Megilah* 7a). That day was also a moment of unusual unity. The Torah records each of the steps of our travels through the desert, described in the plural form of “*vayisu*” (they travelled) and “*vayachanu*” (they camped), with the exception of the encampment of the Jewish people at Har Sinai (Shmot 19:2). Rashi cites the midrash that highlights this change and attributes it to the fact that all of the other encampments were filled with divisiveness and complaints, while only this one was “as one person with one heart.” This

seems to be an overall critique of the divisive Jewish behavior at all other times, like children who constantly bicker and fight with each other, and whose parents threatened that they must not misbehave at Har Sinai. Minimally, we take pride in our unity at Sinai for the most important moment of Jewish history. However, this can also be read as a more positive reflection of the mission statement of the Jewish people: We are to welcome diversity of thoughts around all issues

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Nevertheless, in the
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of life and of the Torah, with one exception: we are all to accept the Torah itself.

In the same way, the *Megilah* alludes to the fact that the Jewish people were scattered and of varied minds. We do not all practice in the same ways and do not think as one. Nevertheless, in the face of anti-Semitism we will immediately demonstrate the fact that we are indeed “*keish echad*” as one person, and stand up for each other without a moment’s delay. Similarly,

the *Megilah* closes with the fact that only most of the Jews “held from Mordechai” (“*ratzuy lerov echav*,” 10:3). Many of his contemporaries disagreed with his approaches to halacha and to Haman. There is room for debate, but not at the moment of attack and crisis. *Masechet Megilah* opens with the disparate days of Purim to highlight the fact that our strength is in our celebration of our diversity, which also accentuates our profound unity at the most critical moments.

Thus, Purim and Shavuot are linked in that they are the two greatest moments of unity in the Jewish calendar, and represent the two factors that unify the Jews: the Torah and anti-Semitism. This year our community witnessed moments of incredible unity that centered around these two timeless realities. The Daf Yom Siyum Hashas was celebrated by world Jewry in the most unified way. This was by far the largest gathering of Jews in the history of the United States and it was a moment when all Jews put aside our differences in order to celebrate our most central value, *keish echad, belev echad*.

Similarly, the acts of anti-Semitic terror that have plagued us have also highlighted the fact that all Jews stand by each other, regardless of denomination or sect. As Moshe Dovid Ferencz told one shiva visitor from outside of his Jersey City community, “we are all one heartz” (heart).

May we experience our unity in times of joy and in celebration of our Torah.



A HALLEL BY ANY OTHER NAME: THE OMISSION OF HALLEL ON PURIM

Twenty-one. It's not just a drinking age or a winning hand in blackjack. Precisely twenty-one days a year, as the Gemara¹ reports, Jews living in the Diaspora recite a full rendition of Hallel. That list is limited to all nine days of Sukkos (including Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah), both days of Shavuos, the first two days of Pesach, and all eight days of Chanukah.

Now read that list again. Notice any anomalies? The Gemara noticed three. And it devotes the time to both articulate and resolve them. Let's quickly go through each one.

What happened to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the two most



recognizable holidays on the Jewish calendar? Are these two days of awe not worthy of a Hallel recitation? The Gemara² explains that the celebratory nature of Hallel is incongruous with the sobering theme of Rosh Hashanah

and Yom Kippur. "Is it possible," challenges the Gemara, "that the King is sitting upon the throne of judgment with the books of life and death open in front of Him, and the Jews are singing [Hallel]?" The joyous chanting of Hallel on the very days God is deciding the fate of all humanity is deemed to be grossly incompatible and highly inappropriate.

And what about Pesach? Each of the Shalosh Regalim — Sukkos, Shavuos and Pesach — merits a coveted spot on the Hallel list. And in fact, full Hallel is recited on each and every day of both Sukkos and Shavuos. Yet, full Hallel is only recited on the first two days of Pesach and not the last six. Why is it that we recite full Hallel

on every day of Sukkos and Shavuot but not every day of Pesach? Why should the holiday of Pesach... wait for it... be different from all other holidays? The Gemara,³ after pointing out this incongruity, resolves it with a rather technical (while fundamentally crucial) distinction that we will not be discussing in this forum.⁴

But there is one last glaring issue that we need to contemplate. The Gemara⁵ asks why Hallel is completely omitted on Purim. After all, its rabbinic counterpart, Chanukah, merits a recitation of full Hallel on each of its eight days. On Purim, however, we omit Hallel completely. Not a full or even half Hallel is to be found. Why? The Gemara presents three answers, and we will focus our attention on the last of them.⁶

R' Yitzchak explains that once the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel as a nation, Hallel was no longer recited on account of miraculous events that took place outside its boundaries. So while the miraculous

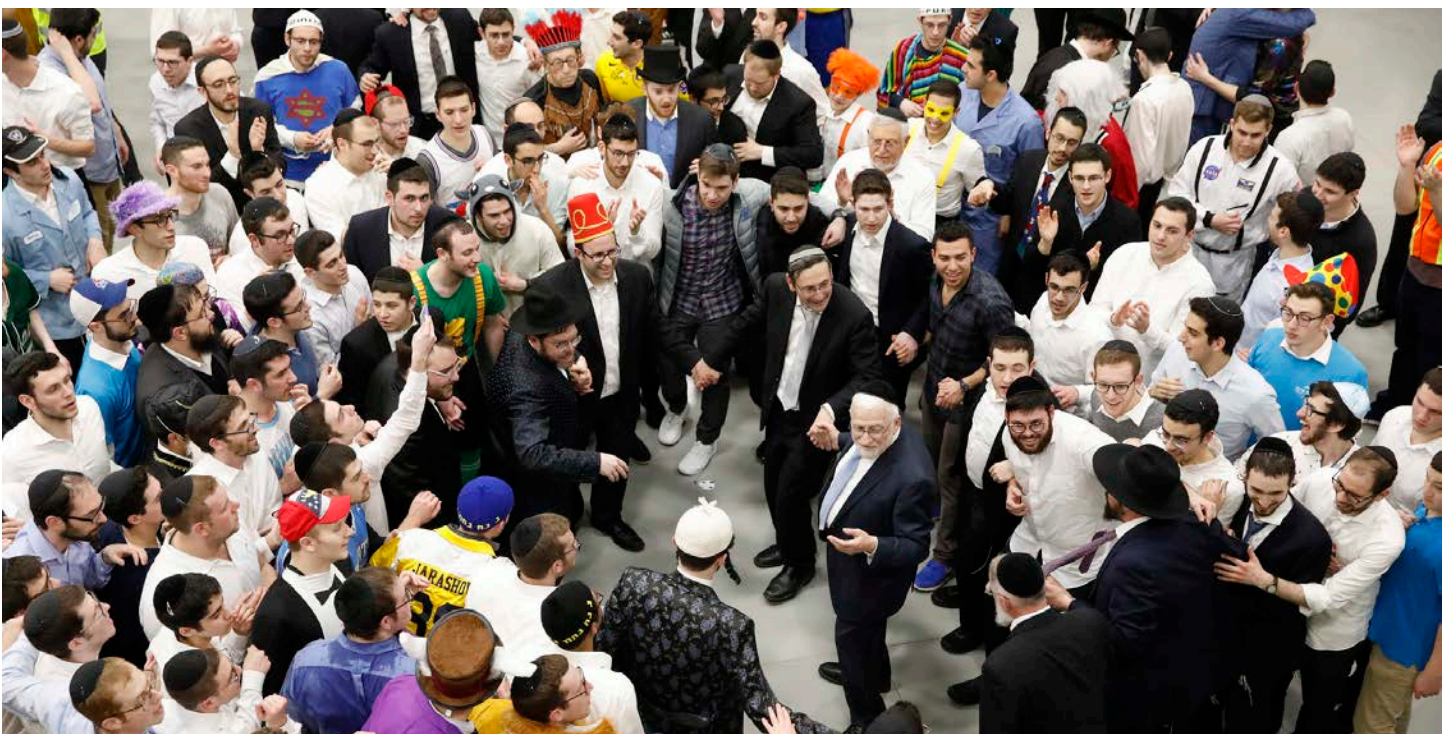
events of the Exodus from Egypt predate our crossing of the Jordan River, the spectacular story of Purim did not. As such, we recite Hallel on Pesach but omit it on Purim.

Rava explains that Hallel is only recited on a salvation or redemption that is complete and comprehensive. So while the Purim story celebrates how God extricated the Jews from Haman's evil plot, the dictatorial persecution under the rule of

R' Nachman explains that our assumption about not reciting Hallel on Purim is flawed. We do, in fact, recite Hallel on Purim (surprise!); it's just packaged differently.

Achashverosh persisted and therefore, reciting Hallel on Purim would be premature and misrepresentative of the storyline.

The third and final answer, presented by R' Nachman, is quite novel, and conceptually distinct from the prior two answers. R' Nachman explains that our assumption about not reciting Hallel on Purim is flawed. We do, in fact, recite Hallel on Purim (surprise!); it's just packaged differently. Instead of turning to the back of our siddurim as we are used to doing on holidays for the recitation of the familiar psalms of King David, the recitation of Megillas Esther on Purim takes the place of reciting Hallel. By publicly telling over the entire Purim story in full detail the way we do each and every year, we are praising and thanking Hashem for His love and concern for the Jewish people, which is precisely what Hallel is all about. By reading the Megillah in shul, we are fulfilling our right and obligation to recite Hallel on Purim.



This innovative opinion of R' Nachman's is accepted by several rishonim.⁷ The Rambam,⁸ for example, explicitly writes that there is no recitation of Hallel on the holiday of Purim because the reading of the Megillah is the Hallel. The Meiri⁹ then presents an even more novel corollary of R' Nachman's opinion. In a community where there is no Megillah to be found, since nobody in that location will be able to fulfill their obligation of reading the Megillah that morning, this group of people should make sure to recite full Hallel instead.

The logic of the Meiri certainly does seem to be reasonable and persuasive. The Gemara asked why there is no recitation of Hallel on Purim. R' Nachman explains that our reading of the Megillah on Purim morning also doubles as the Hallel recitation. Ergo, when reading the Megillah is not possible, one should, ostensibly, recite Hallel the way we normally would — a seemingly flawless argument. And yet, none of the other rishonim agree with the lone-voiced suggestion of the Meiri. Why not?

While Chanukah and Purim are often grouped together as twin holidays, they manifest more as fraternal twins than identical twins. That is to say, that while Chazal instituted both Chanukah and Purim to commemorate the Ribono Shel Olam's miraculous salvation performed on behalf of the Jewish people, the miracle narratives are very different from one another. On Chanukah, (in addition to the military victory that is often overlooked), we celebrate the story of the oil that supernaturally burned for eight days. We sing and dance over witnessing the hand of God suspending the laws of nature in front of our very eyes.

The overt and irrefutable miracle of the oil is the focal point of our joyous rejoicing on Chanukah.

But Purim celebrates an entirely different type of miracle. There was no overt suspension of nature or science. On Purim we celebrate the hidden hand of God that silently orchestrates the natural world around us while remaining unseen. The Purim story, as portrayed in Megillas Esther, does not describe God intervening or performing wondrous supernatural feats. It's a story containing several "coincidental" and improbable occurrences strung together scene after scene. No one event alone is impossible, but the likelihood of them all naturally occurring in immediate succession by mere happenstance is. The difference between Chanukah and Purim is the difference between a *neis nigleh*, an overt miracle, and a *neis nistar*, a concealed miracle. While the former is significantly more noticeable and monumental than the latter, both need to be acknowledged and applauded.

As such, Rav Yitzchak Hutner¹⁰ posits that the way we acknowledge, praise, and thank the Almighty for His miraculous intervention must correspond to the type of intervention that God puts forth. When God chooses to show Himself through a *neis nigleh*, openly and in plain sight, as He did on Chanukah, then we, commensurately, recite Hallel openly and plainly. However, when God chooses to show Himself through a *neis nistar*, hidden and non-obvious, as He did on Purim, then we, in turn, recite a hidden and non-obvious Hallel in the form of reading the Megillah. It's not that reading the Megillah is an alternate way of reciting Hallel on Purim; rather, it's the *only*

way to recite Hallel on Purim. In light of Rav Hutner's explanation, reciting Hallel on Purim in lieu of the Megillah, like the Meiri suggested, does not serve as a viable option.

Much like the story of Purim, God is not (easily) found in the text of the Megillah itself, but He is very much there if we read between the lines. Let us allow the holiday of Purim to remind us to constantly search for the hand of God that is always hiding between the lines in our lives.

Endnotes

1. *Arachin* (10a).
2. *Ibid* (10b).
3. *Ibid*.
4. Namely, that we bring a different set of korbanos each day of Sukkos, while the sacrificial lineup on each of the last six days of Pesach is identical.
5. *Arachin* (*ibid*), *Megillah* (14a).
6. The order of the three answers as printed in the Gemara has been adjusted for presentational purposes.
7. See *Sha'arei Teshuva* (693:3).
8. *Mishneh Torah* (Chanukah 3:6).
9. *Beis Habechira* (*Megillah* 14a).
10. *Pachad Yitzchak* (Purim 33).



PURIM: THE HOLIDAY WHERE WE CELEBRATE ACCEPTING THE TORAH?

The Gemara in *Masechet Shabbat* 88a tells us that when the Torah was given to the Jewish people, they were coerced into receiving it, almost like “having a gun to their heads”:

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.

“And they stood under the mount” R.

Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, “If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your burial.” R. Aha b.



Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah.

The Midrash says that God held a mountain over the heads of the Jewish people to compel them to agree to the laws found in the Torah. Rashi

explains that due to this coercion, the Jewish people would have legal justification to claim that they could not be held responsible for keeping the laws since a person who enters a contract under duress is not bound by it. This principle is seen in monetary law, as expressed in the *Shulchan Aruch, Choshen Mishpat* 205:1:

אם מסר מודעא קודם שימכור ואמר לשני עדים דעו שזה שאני מוכר חפץ פלוני או שדה פלוני לפלוני מפני אונס הרי המכר בטל ואפילו החזיק כמה שנים מוציאים אותה מידו ומחזיר הדמים.

...If the seller conveys a protest before the sale and says to two witnesses, “know that I am selling the object or field to so and so under duress,” then the sale

is annulled, and even if the buyer had possession for several years we still remove it from him and return the money.

The Gemara then tells us that this legal claim expired at the time of Purim, when the Jewish people reaccepted the Torah without duress:

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

Said Raba, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, "the Jews confirmed, and took upon them etc."

It is important to explore the nature of the coercion at Matan Torah, and to understand why it took close to a thousand years for that coercive force to end.

At Matan Torah, and later at Har Grizim and Har Eival, it is clear that Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah; yet Rabbeinu Tam explains (*Shabbat* 88a) that because the Torah was given as the direct word of Hashem, it was considered as if Bnei Yisrael were coerced into accepting it. Why? At Matan Torah, Bnei Yisrael had just witnessed the unprecedented miracles of Yetziat Mitzraim: the ten plagues and the splitting of the sea. They were then taken into the desert where they were given the miraculous manna. Finally, at Har Sinai they all had an experience of prophecy as they heard Hashem speak. Freedom of choice can only exist when a person has the option to either accept or reject something, and where there is comparable push to either side. Even the most ardent atheists would admit that if they personally experienced the events leading up to Matan Torah and then heard Hashem speak to them, they too would accept the

word of Hashem. Ultimately, Hashem wants His people to exercise their free choice in accepting Him and His laws, and the direct experience of the Divine at Har Sinai precluded this. Their acceptance cannot be considered a free choice, since there really is only one option. As such, this acceptance of the Torah can reasonably be classified as a coerced choice. Yet why does this coercion last for close to another thousand years?

If we explore Jewish history from the time of Matan Torah until Purim, we see a constant struggle with many ups and downs. Battles were won and battles were lost but through it all, Hashem's connection to His people was apparent. They continued to maintain their political and spiritual independence, had active prophecy, and witnessed miracles on a daily basis in the Temple, as we learn in *Yoma* 21a:

עשרה נסים נעשו בבית המקדש לא הפילה אשה מריח בשר הקדש ולא הסריח בשר הקדש מעולם ולא נראה זבוב בבית המטבחים ולא אירע קרי לכהן גדול ביום הכפורים ולא נמצא פסול בעומר ובשתי הלחם ובלחם הפנים עומדים צפופים ומשתחווים רווחים ולא הזיק נחש ועקרב בירושלים מעולם ולא אמר אדם לחברו צר לי המקום שאלין בירושלים.
Ten miracles were done in the Temple: no woman miscarried from the scent of the holy flesh; the holy flesh never became putrid; no fly was seen in the slaughterhouse; no pollution ever befell the high priest on the Day of Atonement; no rain ever quenched the fire of the wood-pile on the altar; neither did the wind overcome the column of smoke that arose therefrom; nor was there ever found any disqualifying defect in the Omer or in the two loaves, or in the showbread; though the people stood closely pressed together, they still found wide spaces between them to prostrate

The Vilna Gaon on the G-d's Hidden Hand in Megillat Esther

ומ"ש אסתר מן התורה מנין פירוש היכן מרומז שאפילו בהסתר פנים דהיינו בגלות עושה לנו נסים נס גדול כזה ואמרו דכתיב ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא פי' אפילו בשעת הסתר פנים אשלח את אסתר.

Our rabbis (Chullin 139b) asked, "Where do we see [a hint to] Esther in the Torah?" What they mean is, "Where do we see a hint to the fact that even in times where Divine providence is hidden, in times of exile, does He perform such great miracles for us like [the ones performed in the Megillah]? The rabbi said that it is based on the verse (Devarim 31:18), "And I will hide (haster astir) my face on that day," meaning that even in times of hiddenness, I will send Esther.

Chidushei HaGra, Megillah 11a

themselves; never did serpent or scorpion injure anyone in Jerusalem, nor did any man ever say to his fellow: The place is too narrow for me to stay overnight in Jerusalem.

With this level of Divine presence and connection, the original coercive nature of the revelation at Sinai continued unabated.

All of this changed at the time of Purim. The Jewish people lost their spiritual and political independence when the First Temple was destroyed and they were exiled. They had not lost just a battle; they had also lost the war. The miracles of the Temple were absent, and the Divine presence was hidden. Even though we recognize the Purim story as a miraculous event, we know that it was a hidden miracle.

Even though Megilat Esther is a sefer that focuses on the extreme challenges faced by the Jewish people and their ultimate salvation, we see no mention of Hashem anywhere in the text. For the first time since the exodus from Egypt, the Jewish people faced the prospect of complete annihilation, and grappled with the challenge of feeling completely abandoned by Hashem.

The hidden nature of Hashem, *hester panim*, at this moment in history created the opportunity for the Jewish people to finally experience complete free will, where they could choose to accept or reject Hashem and His laws. Since they continued to believe and to accept the Torah in these circumstances, it became clear that their acceptance did not depend on overt miracles and undeniable revelation.

Rabbeinu Tam (*Shabbat* 88a) explains that the Jewish people accepted the Torah at this point in history out of their love and appreciation for the miracle of their salvation. This idea offers a profound insight into human nature and our relationship with Hashem. During the thousand years that the Jewish people experienced independence and miracles, they did not appreciate these gifts to the degree that would motivate them to accept the Torah freely. Often, when we experience something on a regular basis, even overt and awesome miracles, we take it for granted and it becomes part of the accepted status quo. Unfortunately, sometimes the only way to regain an appreciation for Hashem's involvement in our lives is to have that involvement completely concealed so that the loss can be noticed, and people can then

anticipate its return.

Since the time of Purim, the Jewish people have faced even greater *hester panim*, with close to 2,000 years of exile filled with extreme persecution and destruction. Despite the ease with which they could have rejected their beliefs, the Jewish people continue to live lives committed to Hashem and His Torah. With this strong and undeniable commitment, given with the greatest possible free will, may we merit to see a time when Hashem is revealed to the world, when we can once again experience the miracles of the Temple, and when He and His name will be one.

