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Yeshiva University Center for the Jewish Future

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Established by Rabbi Hyman and Ann Arbesfeld

March 2022 • Purim 5782

Dedicated in memory of our beloved

Mr. Willy Apfel a”h

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Table of Contents

Purim 2022/5782

Dedicated in memory of our beloved Mr. Willy Apfel a”h

לעילוי נשמת רב זאב בן עזריאל

Sheila and Ronny Apfel and family

Introduction: Torat Zion: On the Value of Victory in Exile

Rabbi Dr. Ari Berman Page 4

Megillah Minhagim

Rabbi Eliezer Barany Page 7

Setting the Stage for Salvation

Ms. Sydney Daitch Page 9

Esther as Paragon of Spiritual Resistance: Rav Lichtenstein’s Reading of Esther Reconsidered

Rabbi Daniel Fridman Page 11

Mordechai and Haman: A Match That Makes Scents

Mrs. Mimi Fuchs Page 14

Haman's Fight for Esav's Legacy

Mrs. Elana Katz Page 17

Coincidence? I Think Not: The Lesson of Amalek

Rabbi Yair Menchel Page 20

Moshe Rabbeinu and Purim: Always Yearning for More

Rabbi Mayer Simcha Stromer Page 23

Overlooking Ezra: Reaccepting the Torah in Megillat Esther

Rabbi Shlomo Wadler, PhD Page 25

Sinah and Ahava Lishma

Rabbi Elie Weissman Page 28

Should I Take the Day Off from Work? The Nature of the Melacha Prohibition on Purim

Rabbi Ezra Wiener Page 30



TORAT ZION: ON THE VALUE OF VICTORY IN EXILE

The most precious resources are the ones that are most limited. From one's financial choices to how one decides to spend one's time, these questions reveal much about our personal character and life's mission. One of those resources is political capital. There are only a certain number of times one can ask a favor of someone else. What we expend political capital for, especially with those in seats of real power, is a reflection on what we value most.

In Tanach, there are two parallel situations in which we read about Jewish heroes who stood before a powerful king seeking grace for the Jewish people.

One is in the Book of Nechemia. Nechemia was a trusted advisor in the inner court of the Persian king

Artechshasta. Upon hearing of the sorry state of affairs in Jerusalem — the walls were in ruins and the Jewish residents left unprotected — Nechemia put his own security in jeopardy and came forward and asked the king to rebuild Jerusalem.

וַיֹּאמֶר לִי הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל מֶה זֶה אַתָּה מְבַקֵּשׁ
וְאַתְּפַלֵּל אֵל אֱ-לֹהֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם. וַאֲמַר לַמֶּלֶךְ אִם
עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם יִיטֵב עֲבֹדְךָ לְפָנָיִךְ אֲשֶׁר
תִּשְׁלַחְנִי אֵל יְהוּדָה אֵל עִיר קְבָרוֹת אַבְתִּי
וְאֲבָנָנָה.

The king said to me, "What is your request?" With a prayer to the God of Heaven, I answered the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, to rebuild it."

Nechemia Chapter 2

The king agrees and the walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt.

Interestingly, the story of Purim takes place some time before Nechemia, and the state of Jerusalem was similarly in ruins. And once again we read of a Jewish hero who risks his life by asking the king for a favor.

In fact, there were two favors that Esther asked. The first was to save the Jewish people from the evil decree contrived by Haman. The Persian king Achashverosh agrees and the Jewish people were permitted to defend themselves and defeat their enemies. The second favor took place the day after the first request was already fulfilled to save the Jewish people. Once again, Esther appears before the Persian king, Achashverosh, and once again the king offers to grant her request:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְאַסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בְּשׁוֹשׁן הַבִּירָה
הֲרָגוּ הַיְהוּדִים וְאֲבָד חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וְאֵת

עֲשֶׂת בְּנֵי הַמֶּן בְּשָׂרָר מְדִינֹת הַמְּלָךְ מִה עֲשֶׂה וּמִה שְׂאֵלְתָהּ וַיִּנְתֶּן לָהּ וּמִה בְּקִשְׁתָּהּ עוֹד וְתַעֲשֶׂה. וְהָאָמֵר אֶסְתֵּר אִם עַל הַמְּלָךְ טוֹב יִנְתֶּן גַּם מִחֶרֶץ לַיהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׂוֹשׁ לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּדַת הַיּוֹם וְאֵת עֲשֶׂת בְּנֵי הַמֶּן יִתְּלוּ עַל הַעֵץ. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמְּלָךְ לַהֲעֲשׂוֹת כֹּן וְהַנִּתֵּן דַּת בְּשׂוֹשׁ וְאֵת עֲשֶׂת בְּנֵי הַמֶּן תִּלְּוּ. וַיִּקְהִלוּ הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׂוֹשׁ גַּם בַּיּוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר וַיְהִי רִגְוֹ בְּשׂוֹשׁ שְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ וּבְבִזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת יָדָם.

The king said to Queen Esther, "In the fortress Shushan alone the Jews have killed a total of five hundred men, as well as the ten sons of Haman. What then must they have done in the provinces of the realm! What is your wish now? It shall be granted you. And what else is your request? It shall be fulfilled." "If it please Your Majesty," Esther replied, "let the Jews in Shushan be permitted to act tomorrow also as they did today; and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on the stake." The king ordered that this should be done, and the decree was proclaimed

in Shushan. Haman's ten sons were impaled: And the Jews in Shushan mustered again on the fourteenth day of Adar and slew three hundred men in Shushan. But they did not lay hands on the spoil.

Esther Chapter 9

Esther requests that King Achashverosh allow the Jews to root out more enemies in the capital Shushan. Achashverosh agrees and this is the reason that walled cities celebrate the holiday of Shushan Purim on the 14th of Adar.

Esther's second request is particularly noteworthy. One can readily understand why her first request was to save the entire Jewish people from the evil decree of genocidal destruction. But by the second time Achashverosh offered to grant her a request, the Jewish People were

already saved. Esther could have asked for anything. Keep in mind, Jerusalem was in ruins at the time. But instead of asking for Jerusalem, Esther asked for greater security for the Jews in the diaspora.

The scene and language in Nechemia and in Esther are nearly identical. In both stories, two loyal Jews are asked, "what do you seek." The parallelism is deliberate, these two stories are in conversation with one another. Of the two stories, Esther is clearly the aberration.

Nearly all of Tanach is focused on Israel. Even those stories that took place outside of Israel are facing Israel, yearning towards our homeland. In a number of sources, we see an ambivalence towards Esther. The Gemara teaches that there was some hesitation by Chazal to include Esther

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TORAT EMET

אמת
TRUTH

We believe in truth, and humanity's ability to discover it.

The pursuit of truth has always been the driving force behind advances in human understanding, from Socrates' wanderings through the streets of Athens to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution. People of faith, who believe in a divine author of Creation, believe that the act of discovery is sacred, whether in the realm of philosophy, physics, economics or the study of the human mind.

The Jewish people in particular affirm that beginning with the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God entrusted eternal teachings and values to us that we must cherish and study diligently above all else, for they represent the terms of the special covenant that God made with us. All people, regardless of their faith background, should value the accumulation of knowledge because it is the way to truth and a prerequisite to human growth.

TORAT CHAIM

חיים
LIFE

We believe in bringing values to life.

Jewish thought asserts that truth is made available to human beings not simply so that they can use it but also so that they can use it. Students studying literature, computer science, law, psychology or anything else are expected to take what they learn and implement it within their own lives as well as apply it to the real world around them.

When people see a problem that needs addressing, their responsibility is to draw upon the truths they uncovered during their studies in finding a solution. They must live truth in the real world, not simply study it in the classroom.

TORAT ADAM

אדם
INFINITE HUMAN WORTH

We believe in the infinite worth of each and every human being.

Judaic tradition first introduced to the world the radical proposition that each individual is created in the divine image and accordingly possesses incalculable worth and value.

The unique talents and skills each individual possesses are a reflection of this divine image, and it is therefore a sacred task to hone and develop them. The vast expansive human diversity that results from this process is not a challenge but a blessing. Each of us has our own path to greatness.

TORAT CHESD

חסד
COMPASSION

We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others in compassion.

Even as we recognize the opportunities of human diversity, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of common obligations. In particular, every human being is given the same responsibility to use his or her unique gifts in the service of others; to care for their fellow human beings; to reach out to them in thoughtfulness, kindness and sensitivity; and to form a connected community.

TORAT ZION

ציון
REDEMPTION

We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and move history forward.

In Jewish thought, the concept of redemption represents the conviction that while we live in an imperfect world, we have a responsibility to strive toward its perfection. Regardless of a person's personal convictions about whether social perfection is attainable or even definable, it is the act of working toward it that gives our lives meaning and purpose. This common striving is an endeavor that brings all of humanity together.

The Jewish people's task to build up the land of Israel into an inspiring model society represents this effort in microcosm. But it is part of a larger project that includes all of humankind. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then redemption represents our responsibility to work together in the service of God to move history forward.

within the larger canon of Tanach. Even upon accepting Esther and the holiday of Purim as obligatory, one Sage thought that we cannot sing Hallel on this day because it was a salvation that happened outside the land of Israel. Perhaps most acutely in its subtle criticism of Esther is the opinion recorded in the Talmud Yerushalmi that explains why walled cities who celebrate on the 15th of Adar are defined by the time of Yehoshua bin Nun, when the Jewish people entered into Israel.

רבי סימון בשם רבי יהושע בל לוי חלקו כבוד
לארץ ישראל שהיתה חריבה באותן הימים
ותלו אותה מימות יהושע בן נון.

Rebbe Simon in the name of Rebbe Yehoshua ben Levi explained that in order to accord honor to the Land of Israel, which was destroyed at the time of Purim story, they defined walled cities based on the time of Yehoshua bin Nun. Talmud Yerushalmi, Megillah 1:1

We cannot set the ruling by the time of Achashverosh, because at the time, there were historically walled cities in Israel that were in ruins. It is not difficult to hear a cry in the Talmud Yerushalmi to “give honor to Eretz Yisrael,” a sentiment that the Purim story seems to be lacking.

With this background, one can understand that Esther taken together with Nechemia, especially in the context of all of the stories of Tanach, contains an essential life lesson.

The absence of Israel from the Megillah frames the entire story as a galut story and a galut victory. The

final redemption is missing. But that, in fact, is the point: A galut victory is still a part of the geulah, our collective redemption. What happens in the Diaspora matters. It matters not only to the Jews living there but matters in the greater story of the Jewish people. The story of Esther and Mordechai, which is not just a story of Jewish survival but a story of Jewish values being lived and spread throughout the world, is also part of redemption. That Mordechai does not bow to idols or seats of power, that Esther risks her life for the Jewish People, that we celebrate by spreading good will to our neighbors and caring for our poor are all messages that are essential to Jewish life.

Even in exile, we remain tethered to the ultimate redemption. Even in exile, we can experience redemption and move history forward.

But the story of Esther needs to be contextualized by Nechemia and the rest of Tanach. Even in exile, we remain tethered to the ultimate redemption. Even in exile, we can experience redemption and move history forward. A part of the redemption story, a part of our canon, includes the slow and subtle bending of our national trajectory

even if that redemptive arc takes some time to reach our ultimate end. That even removed from Israel, we must remain connected to our redemptive stories. Esther without Nechemia is an impoverished story, but Tanach without Esther is missing the integral nature of her Diasporic story and, in a larger sense, *our* exilic stories.

Much of life can feel disconnected from our own personal final destinations. Our professional lives, our religious lives, our family lives continue to evolve and emerge throughout our lives. We have not yet reached our destination. Life itself can feel exilic. Esther is a reminder that even in galut, an exilic victory is still a part of the redemptive story. Esther pleaded to be included in Tanach and it is a plea that echoes in each generation. We ask that our stories, no matter how far removed from the eventual geulah shleimah, have the dignity and merit to be canonized within the larger story of the Jewish people. When the story of Esther was canonized, in a larger sense, each of our galut stories were included as well. The greater canon of the Jewish people gathered all of our particular stories to be included within the grand narrative of kneset Yisrael — an enduring reminder that even our galut victories are included in the great unfolding narrative of our collective geulah.



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MEGILLAH MINHAGIM

מנהג כל ישראל שהקורא קורא ופושטה כאיגרת, להראות הנס. וכשיגמור, חוזר וכורכה כולה ומברך.

It is a custom of all Jews that the reader reads and spreads out [the Megillah] like a letter to display the miracle. When one finishes, it is rolled up and a blessing is recited.

Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 690:17

On Purim there is a requirement to read the Megillah once at night and to repeat it during the day. However, there are some interesting *minhagim* that accompany these readings. For instance, we spread out the Megillah like a letter while it is read. Additionally, the Rama, *Orach*



Chayim 690:17, adds that it is our practice that the entire congregation reads four verses aloud. These four verses are referred to as the redemptive verses.

What is strange about this practice is that the Megillah is best read in a public audience. The reading of the Megillah publicizes the miracle that occurred to the Jews, who were saved by the hand of Hashem. A minyan enhances the reading and increases the publicizing of this miracle. In fact, all things being equal, we should go

to the largest minyan possible to hear the Megillah. This is why the *Mishnah Berurah* points out that the Megillah reader should repeat those four verses, despite each person having read them on their own, because it is best for people to hear it from the reader, from a kosher Megillah.

Another *minhag* is the practice to bang at the sound of the name of Haman. The *Mishnah Berurah* directs the Chazan to not read the name of Haman during the noise, so the entire congregation can hear the word being read.

What is the point of these *minhagim*? Wouldn't it be better to avoid *minhagim* that inhibit our ability to hear each word from someone reading

from a kosher Megillah scroll? The *Mishnah Berurah* says that we read the verses individually because of *simchah*, happiness. How does *simchah* translate to this practice, and does it allow for other things? Would it be appropriate to say other verses out loud, or even shout out extraneous matters? Apparently not, as the *Mishnah Berurah* quotes the *Pri Megadim* on the same halachah and says that those who make too much noise lose their reward.

So it seems that some things are allowed for *simchah* while others are not. In addition to that, it seems that if not for the *simchah* aspect, it would be best to not even read the four verses on our own, since it is best to hear them from the reader.

א"ר חלבו אמר רב חמא בר גוריא אמר רב
מגילה נקראת ספר ונקראת אגרת.

Rabbi Chelbo said further that Rav Chama bar Gurya said that Rav said: The Megillah is referred to as a "book" (Esther 9:32), and it is also referred to as a "letter." (Esther 9:29)

Megillah 19a



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The Gemara explains that the Megillah is referred to as both a book and a letter. The Gemara shares that there are practical applications concerning the stitching of them. A book needs a quality of binding that is significant, however, a letter needs much less substance to hold it together. We must ask, why should the stitching matter? What feature does a stronger binding reflect upon a *sefer* (book) and what is indicated in an *igeret* (letter) that is held together in a weaker fashion?

Rav Yisroel Chait explains that the word *sefer* reflects permanence and the word *igeret* reflects timeliness. These are two different ideas. A *sefer* is kept but an *igeret* is thrown in the trash the next day. A *sefer* has permanent ideas and an *igeret* shows immediacy. The Megillah has both of these aspects. As such, we can answer all our questions concerning these *minhagim*.

From the perspective of hearing the Megillah, hearing from the reader with a written scroll is best. However, reading these four redemptive verses draws the reader's attention to the story. It allows us to share in the immediacy of the message. It draws us in to feel a part of the story, and helps publicize Hashem's ongoing intervention. As such, it enhances the event of the Megillah. So it is very appropriate.

So, too, by the stomping at the name of Haman, we share in the anger toward the enemy and sincerely feel connected. Stories have been shared throughout Jewish history, when at times after war the people felt a sense of catharsis at the banging of Haman. They often viewed their recent enemy as a current-day Haman, and tangibly felt Hashem's ongoing providence. These practices only add connection

when they are rooted in an authentic experience. If we were to just make noises or read verses on our own, it would detract from the connection to the miracle.

Hopefully, we can be drawn into the reading of the Megillah, especially during such a scary time for many, and turn to Hashem. If we can feel the ongoing relationship Hashem has with us, we may then want to enhance that relationship.

As educators, we face a constant struggle with how to share Torah with students who may sometimes not want to embrace the words of the Almighty. However, just like the rabbis sought to enhance the event of the reading of the Megillah with forms of engagement, so too we should strive to make the experience of learning Torah as sweet as it should be. We may sometimes feel that we are sacrificing some of the breadth of material during the limited time allotted to us to enhance the learning experience. Perhaps we may need to change our approach or specific outlook if the Torah shared is not as lively as we know it to be.

We see from the example given by our rabbis that this apparent sacrifice isn't a disadvantage at all. Rather, it promotes Torah learning, engagement, and prompts greater service in avodat Hashem. May we merit success in guiding our cherished talmidim in their pursuit of Torah, in service of Hashem, and helping them enhance their whole selves. Purim Sameach.



SETTING THE STAGE FOR SALVATION

When we read through the text of Megillat Esther, it's easy to be puzzled by the inclusion of the first two chapters. The core "Purim" story seems to begin with the decree against the Jews, continue with the intervention of Mordechai and Esther, and conclude with the miraculous salvation of the Jews. Though the first few chapters add layer and intrigue to the story, they seem to be a superfluous prologue.

Would we understand the story of Purim without knowing how Vashti was banished from the kingdom? Would we understand the salvation of the Jews without knowing how Esther became queen or that Mordechai had foiled an attempted assassination? While on the surface the answer to



those questions seems to be yes, the inclusion of the first two chapters of Megillat Esther implies otherwise, and we are tasked with finding the deeper understanding they add to our primary story.

Chazal seemed troubled by this very question. The Gemara in Megilla 13b, explains the role of the first two

chapters in our understanding of the Purim story:

”אחר הדברים האלה.” (אחר מאי?) אמר רבא: אחר שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא רפואה למכה. דאמר ריש לקיש: אין הקדוש ברוך הוא מכה את ישראל אלא אם כן בורא להם רפואה תחילה, שנאמר: ”כרפאי לישראל ונגלה עון אפרים”.

The verse explains when the rest of the events of the Megilla occurred: “After these events did King Ahasuerus promote Haman” (Esther 3:1). The Gemara asks: After what particular events? Rava said: Only after the Holy One, Blessed be He, created a remedy for the blow and set in place the chain of events that would lead to the miraculous salvation was Haman appointed, setting the stage for the decree against the Jews to be issued. Rava explains: As Reish Lakish said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, does

not strike at the Jewish people unless He has already created a remedy for them beforehand, as it is stated: "When I would have healed Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim was uncovered" (Hosea 7:1).

Translation: The William Davidson Koren Noe Talmud

The first two chapters of the Megillah teach us that before G-d brings about a danger to the Jewish people, He first creates the cure. This is in contrast to the way G-d works when sending danger to non-Jewish nations. As the Gemara in Megillah 13b continues:

אָבֵל אֹמֵרוֹת הָעוֹלָם אֵינּוּ בֵּן — מִכָּה אוֹתָן
וְאַחֲרַי כִּן בּוֹרֵא לָהֶם רְפוּאָה, שְׁנֵאמַר: "וְנִגְרַף ה'
אֶת מִצְרַיִם נִגְרַף וְרְפוּאָה"

But this is not so with regard to the nations of the world. With them, God first strikes them, and only afterward does He create a remedy, as it is stated: "And the Lord shall smite Egypt, smiting and healing." (Isaiah 19:22)

Translation: The William Davidson Koren Noe Talmud

As it relates to the story of Megillat Esther, before G-d allowed the threat of Haman to be actualized, He first ensured that the road to healing was already paved, namely Esther's position as queen and Mordechai's role in saving the king.

This theme is brought out by the commentators throughout the stories of Tanach: the commandment of the Mishkan prior to the sin of the Golden Calf, the birth of Moshe prior to the worsening of conditions for Jews in Egypt, the commandment about the Parah Adumah prior to the deaths of Miriam and Aharon.

While this explanation of Resh Lakish helps us to understand the inclusion of the prologue in the Megillah, it leaves us with another question: Why

is the timing of the creation of the healing important for us to know? Does it matter *when* the healing was created, or that the healing was created at all? As long as the threat is avoided and the people are saved, why does it matter when the healing was initiated?

The goal was for the Jews to be saved; the threat was simply a means to that end.

The Malbim, in his commentary on the Megillah, addresses this question.

בימים ההם, טרם יבא אל ספור הצרה אשר
היה לישראל, הקדים רפואה למכה, להורות כי
המכה אינו למען הכות רק למען ירפא...
*"In those days" Before it comes to tell
the story of the suffering of the Jewish
people, the remedy was set up before the
crisis to teach us that the crisis is not for
the purpose of punishment but rather for
healing.*

The purpose of telling us the creation of the healing prior to the creation of the danger is to teach us which part of the story is primary. It is not just the coincidental order of the story, it is an essential aspect of the story. The goal was for the Jews to be saved; the threat was simply a means to that end. The Malbim compares this to a bloodletter: he first prepares the tools that will be needed to stop the blood and heal the wound before he even creates the wound, because the ultimate goal is healing. The guiding force behind the decisions being made is the desire to heal.

That is perhaps why Reish Lakish highlights the fact that the concept of *hikdim refuah lamakah* only exists

in the way Hashem deals with Am Yisrael, not in the way He deals with the other nations of the world. There is something unique about the way He treats Bnei Yisrael in that when it comes to His people, healing and success are always the ultimate goal, and struggle and difficulty are just a means to that end.

It is also interesting to note that this theme is brought forth specifically in Megillat Esther, a book that takes place while Bnei Yisrael are in *galut*, and is famously known for the glaring absence of Hashem's name. Perhaps this makes the point even stronger: even in a time of *hester panim*, a time when it might seem like Hashem is absent and restricting His providence and involvement from His people, even then, He is putting the pieces in place for their salvation. Though it may be harder for us to see, Hashem is nonetheless still behind the scenes, making sure we are protected and set up for healing and salvation.

May we all be able to find the healing within our own personal challenges as well as the healing for our national challenges with the coming of Mashiach, *bimheira biyameinu*.



ESTHER AS PARAGON OF SPIRITUAL RESISTANCE: RAV LICHTENSTEIN'S READING OF ESTHER RECONSIDERED

If the final verse in the Megillah draws our attention to the stature Mordechai achieved in the royal court, there can be little question that Esther is the true heroine of the work that bears her name.

As developed in Rav Aharon Lichtenstein's seminal essay, "If You Remain Silent at this Time: Concern for the Jewish People,"¹ Megillah Esther may be understood as the story of a radical transformation of a passive, naive, orphaned young woman into an assertive, fearless defender of her people, whose story and whose holiday will never be forgotten.²

It was Esther, after all, who was responsible for the stature that



Mordechai achieved.³ It was Esther who commanded that Mordechai gather the Jewish people for three fateful days of fasting and prayer, so pivotal for the salvation of the Jewish people.⁴ And indeed, it was Esther who was responsible for the

inclusion of her story in Tanach, and of Purim as a holiday on the Jewish calendar, passionately appealing to the Chachamim of her time, "*keva'uni l'dorot...kitvuni l'dorot.*"⁵

This reading is not mere literary analysis but replete with halakhic significance. According to many Rishonim, the fact that women are obliged in the positive, time-bound mitzvot of Purim is not only because they were threatened by Haman, but rather, "*af hen hayu b'oto ha'nes,*" in the sense that Esther was the primary human mover behind the miraculous salvation of our people.⁶

As such, great emphasis must be placed, as we prepare for Purim, on a rigorous study of Esther's

spiritual development. In the text of the Megillah, we are introduced to the events that unfold in ancient Shushan in a rapid fashion, so that we can take greater note of the hidden Providential hand guiding all that transpires.

And yet, the events of the Megillah actually played out over many years: Vashti is removed as queen in the third year of Achashverosh's reign;⁷ Esther is installed as her replacement in the seventh year of his reign;⁸ Haman ascends to power only some five years later,⁹ when the crucial events of the Megillah play out.

Upon further reflection regarding the extended timeline of these events, we are compelled to ask ourselves a fundamental question: How did Esther manage to survive so many years in the palace, not only in the physical sense of the term, but psychologically and spiritually as well? What sustained her through the long days, months, and years in the court of the depraved and debased ruler of Persia? Let us revisit, certainly with nothing short of reverence, Rav Lichtenstein zt'l's thesis that Esther's years in the palace, until the moment of crisis, are defined by a fundamental passivity.

We can scarcely imagine the sense of despair that Esther had to overcome during those long and lonely years in a palace where she lived daily with the knowledge that her husband was a violent and primitive drunk, who had killed her predecessor in an inebriated rage, and whose carnal desires were utterly insatiable.¹⁰ And yet, even in those dire straits, Esther was a paragon of spiritual resistance.

Chazal,¹¹ who posited a relationship between Mordechai and Esther that went far beyond that of an adoptive

father and daughter,¹² provide us with an image of spiritual heroism almost unrivaled in all of rabbinic literature:

שהיתה עומדת מחיקו של אחשורוש וטובלת
ויושבת בחיקו של מרדכי.

*She would arise from Achashverosh,
immerse herself, and return to
Mordechai.*

While this *tevilah* was likely not technically required,¹³ Esther purified herself from the repeated coercive acts that the bestial Achashverosh performed upon her, finding a reservoir of spiritual courage in the mitzvah of *taharat hamishpacha* to resume her life of sanctity with Mordechai.

This commitment, in Chazal's telling, to the sacred patterns of *taharat hamishpacha*, is hardly an isolated element of Esther's five years in the palace before the rise of Haman, even if, by far, it is the most dramatic.

Indeed, Chazal equally portray Esther as making heroic efforts to observe Shabbat, with Esther utilizing the seven ladies in waiting in rotation to track the arrival of Shabbat.¹⁴ Similarly, even though, according to one view, Esther was deliberately fed non-kosher foods in the palace, she, as Tosafot assert, categorically refused to eat such foods.¹⁵

What emerges, in aggregate, is an alternative conception of the early Esther. To be sure, in the moment of crisis, as Rav Lichtenstein depicts, Esther must be spurred to action by Mordechai's trenchant rebuke regarding her apparent lack of concern for the Jewish people, *al tidami v'nafshech l'himalet beit ha'melech mi'kol ha'yehudim* — Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace.

And yet, what prepared Esther to make the ultimate sacrifice for her people, "*ka'asher avaditi, avaditi*,"¹⁶ — if I am lost, I am lost — both with respect to her life and her union with Mordechai, was perhaps the years she had already spent cultivating a sense of spiritual dignity under the most adverse conditions imaginable.

We have, then, not a passive young maiden, the "*tabula rasa*" of Rav Lichtenstein's depiction, but a model of deep spirituality, albeit privately expressed. The transition that Esther must then undergo is perhaps better defined as understanding that her spiritual heroism must now transcend the individual realm — her heroic though necessarily private efforts to maintain Shabbat, kashrut, and elements of *taharat ha'mishpacha* — be brought to bear on the destiny of an entire people.

Small wonder, then, that after Esther has fully internalized the needs of the hour, in order for her private spiritual heroism to manifest itself publicly, she calls for three days of intensive communal prayer and fasting. This hardly seems the natural response of a young and passive woman who was heretofore bereft of spiritual gumption. On the contrary, it is a classically formulated response, employing both *ta'anit*, *teshuvah*, and *tza'akah* as crucial elements of any legitimate halakhic approach to crisis.¹⁷

If, as Chazal asserted, the impetus for the crisis of the Jews of Persia was their spiritual desiccation, *nehenu m'seudato shel oto rasha* (they participated in the feast of Achashverosh),¹⁸ *she'lo asku ba'Torah* (they didn't study Torah),¹⁹ *al am dal-dalim min ha-mitzvot* (lax in mitzvah observance);²⁰ and their

salvation was accompanied by a spiritual renaissance, *orah- zo Torah, simcha- zo yom tov, sasson- zo milah, v'yekar- elu tefillin*²¹ — “light” refers to Torah, “happiness” refers to the festivals, “joy” refers to circumcision, “and splendor” refers to tefillin — it stands to reason that this spiritual rejuvenation could only have been mediated via a leader whose greatness was indeed measured in her unflagging commitment to Torah, under the most adverse conditions.

This recasting of Esther’s transition leads to a tantalizing new understanding of the message of Megillat Esther. For all of Esther’s private spiritual heroism during five dark and long years in the palace, her true greatness was yet to reveal itself. When Haman and Achashverosh threw down the gauntlet to the Jewish people,²² and Mordechai helped Esther understand that she alone could be the Divine agent of the salvation of her people, she was equal to the awesome task placed in front of her.

It was precisely the acts of spiritual conviction that Esther undertook, day after day, month after month, year after year, that enabled Esther to cross her own personal Rubicon on behalf of her people, when circumstances demanded it from her.

In this sense, a new dialectic emerges: insofar as Esther guarded, with unsurpassed tenacity, the strictures of Torah in the den of debauchery that was the Persian palace, they, in turn, guarded and fortified her.

Replete with intrinsic significance, every mitzvah she performed during her years in the palace also played an instrumental role, developing the spiritual fiber so essential to her even more impressive heroism later in the Megillah.

If it was later to be said that Waterloo was first won on the fields of Eton, the Esther who is every iota the deserving heroine of her eponymous scroll was not the product of a radical epiphany in a moment of crisis alone. Rather, she may be better understood as a spiritual paragon, forged over time in a personal crucible of over five years, steeled for the singular moment for which, indeed, she had become queen.

Endnotes

1. *By His Light*, Lichtenstein, Aharon. Translated and edited by Reuven Ziegler. Maggid Modern Classics, 2017. Available online at <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/if-you-remain-silent-time-concern-jewish-people>.
2. Esther 9:28. See Rambam, *Hilkhos Megillah V'Chanukah* 2:18, regarding both the eternal nature of the megillah and the observance of Purim.
3. Esther 8:1-2.
4. Esther 4:16.
5. *Megillah* 7a.
6. See Tosafot to *Megillah* 4a, as well as comments of Ritva and Rashba ad loc.
7. Esther 1:3.
8. Esther 2:16.
9. Esther 3:7.
10. See *Megillah* 13b, with Rashi ad loc., regarding the connection between the depth

of Achashverosh’s carnal depravity and the assassination plot of Bigtan and Teresh.

11. *Megillah* 13b.
12. R. Meir’s view (*Megillah* 13a) was that Mordechai and Esther were married, אל תקרי לבת אלא לביה.
13. See Rashi (ibid).
14. See *Megillah* 13a, “*she’haita moneh bahen yemei Shabbat*.”
15. See *Megillah* (ad loc.), as well as Tosafot s.v. *kidlei d’chazirei*.
16. See *Megillah* 15a, “*ka’asher avaditi mi’beit abba, kach oved mimcha*.”
17. Esther’s response could be considered nothing short of paradigmatic from the standpoint of Rambam. See *Hilkhos Ta’anuyot* 1:1-3.
18. *Megillah* 12a.
19. *Megillah* 11a.
20. *ibid*.
21. *Megillah* 16b.
22. See *Megillah* 14a, with regard to the relationship between Haman and Achashverosh, and their mutual enmity of the Jews. See also *Megillah* 16a, which interprets Esther, upon reciting the words “*ish tzar v’oyev*”, as referring to Achashverosh and not Haman. This is of course confirmed by the only other occasion in which Achashverosh is mentioned in Tanach outside of the Megillah, when he enacted a policy preventing the Jewish people from constructing the Mikdash (Ezra 4:6).



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MORDECHAI AND HAMAN: A MATCH THAT MAKES SCENTS

The Purim story is one of the greatest enigmas of our Tanach. It is simple yet highly complex, natural yet undeniably miraculous, straightforward yet glaringly cryptic. In a holiday that celebrates the beauty of things turned “upside down,” a closer look at the intricate arrangement of the Purim salvation reveals that the matchup between Mordechai and Haman is anything but a historically convenient, contemporaneous pairing. Rather, Torah literature is replete with explanations — mostly ideological in nature — as to why Mordechai specifically was destined to squelch the colossal evil of Haman. Mordechai’s eventual victory over Haman is the last in a long line of historical battles between their



ancestors. Why are these two families poised as eternal rivals? What is it about Mordechai that makes him a unique candidate to handle Haman’s pernicious nature? Put another way, why was Mordechai so confident in this duel against such a powerful, influential enemy?

The Midrash (*Bereishit Rabbah* 73:7) explains that there was a well-known tradition that the descendants of Eisav, including Amalek, were destined to fall at the hands of the children of Rachel. Many have

debated the advantage of Yosef and Binyamin over the other shevatim in this regard. According to Chazal, Eisav’s saving grace was his sterling fulfillment of the mitzvah of honoring his father, which fell short only when he attempted to kill his brother Yaakov without considering the pain it would cause his father. The ten sons of Leah, Bilhah, and Zilpah maintained a similar standing since they, too, tried to kill their brother without much consideration for their father’s resulting agony. Bnei Rachel, however, did not participate in the sale of Yosef, and therefore never fell in their observance of this mitzvah, paving their way to an advantage over Eisav’s descendants (*Yismach Moshe*, Vayeshev 3).

In a similar vein, when Yaakov and Eisav met up in one of the most highly anticipated, yet tremendously anticlimactic confrontations in biblical history, Yaakov's entire family — including wives and children — bowed to Eisav. During this pivotal moment between the two rivals, Yaakov's family members subjugated themselves to Eisav, symbolically accepting his dominance over them. However, this act of servitude was only practiced by those in attendance. Since Binyamin was not yet born, he was never in a position to lower himself before Eisav. Perhaps this influenced Mordechai's confidence, as if to uphold the tradition that Binyamin and his descendants have never, and will never, bow to Eisav and his children (*Aish Tamid on Purim* pp. 121-122).

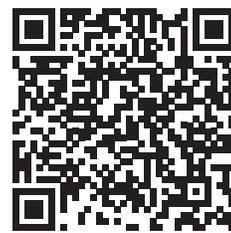
R' Yonatan Eybeschutz (*Yaarot Devash*, Part 2) posits that this tradition was not only well-known among the Jews, it was acknowledged globally as an inevitable truth that weighed heavily on the shoulders of Eisav's descendants. The practical implications of this theory are astonishing. If this was the case, why did Haman campaign against Mordechai with such hubris? Wouldn't he be so clever as to avoid someone from Rachel's line in his crusade for power? The answer is in Mordechai's shrewd decision to make himself known primarily as a *Yehudi*, a descendant of Yehuda, while concealing his identity as a *Yemini*, a member of the tribe of Binyamin. This was all part of a deliberate ploy to boost Haman's confidence and exploit his vulnerability, since Haman surely would *not* have entered himself into a duel against someone from Shevet Binyamin! Only once Haman started to fall to Mordechai does his

wife actually urge him to consider the possibility (his worst nightmare) that Mordechai descended from "those" Jews — those whom his DNA dictates he cannot defeat — the children of Rachel (Esther 6:13.)

There is another angle through which to explore the pairing of Mordechai and Haman. The Gemara (*Chullin* 139b) asks curiously, "*Haman min haTorah minayin?*," where can we find an allusion to Haman's character in the Torah? The Gemara answers: "*HaMin ha'etz...*" — a reference to the aftermath of Adam eating from the tree in Gan Eden, when Hashem asks rhetorically, "*did you eat from the tree...?*" Surely there exists an underlying connection — beyond the obvious wordplay and the centrality of trees — between the episode of Adam and Chava eating from the infamous Tree of Knowledge and the emergence of Haman.

In both stories, Adam and Haman are compelled to acquire the one

Both Adam and Haman are compelled to acquire the one thing placed out of their reach. Both are dissatisfied with the range of opportunities available to them; they cannot restrain themselves from needing absolute access to whatever is limited to them in some way.



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thing placed out of their reach. Both are dissatisfied with the range of opportunities available to them; they cannot restrain themselves from needing absolute access to whatever is limited to them in some way. Further, R' Immanuel Bernstein (*Purim: Removing the Mask*, pp. 137-138) explains, based on the Arizal, that Adam thought that by eating from the tree, he would actually be able to achieve a higher level of *avodat Hashem*. If eating from the tree would make it *harder* for him to fulfill God's word, but he succeeded nonetheless, Adam reasoned that this level of service would be even more worthwhile than had he not sinned in the first place. Using this paradoxical, disillusioned reasoning, Adam categorically defied the explicit command of his Creator. R' Akiva Tatz adds, based on the Zohar, that the result of this flawed rationale — that man's logic could in some way outsmart God — unleashed a mass of chaos and confusion into the world. It was not the force of evil, but rather a dangerous *mixture* of good and evil, that permeated the world as a result of this grave miscalculation. This



essence is characterized by the name of the tree — the tree of knowledge of good and evil — knowledge *not* of good and evil as distinct entities, but as indistinguishable ingredients of a lethal combination.

This symbolism of doubt and uncertainty is indeed the essence of Amalek, Haman’s national orientation. Amalek’s predecessors, Eisav and Elifaz, also personified this doomed combination of good and evil, having both been influenced by the righteousness of Yitzchak in addition to their own evil compulsions. These competing values combined in their psyches to produce distorted logic that was used to justify perverse courses of action. The numerical value of *Amalek* is equal to *safek*, the Hebrew word for doubt. The very hint to Haman in the Torah, symbolized by the tree and the pollution of turmoil it unleashed into the world, is a reference to the ideological, national character of Amalek. They are the nation who infamously attacked us after the wonders of our exodus from Egypt because they sought to perpetuate uncertainty, to neutralize the global reaction to God’s omnipotence, and to wedge themselves between us and our Creator by trying to replace our faith in God with human rationalization.

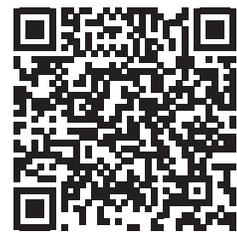
The Gemara continues by questioning Mordechai’s origin in the Torah, “*Mordechai min haTorah minayin? Mor D’ror...*” One of the fragrant spices used in the holy recipe for the anointing oil — which was used to consecrate items in the Beit HaMikdash, bears a resemblance to Mordechai’s name. This connection, too, begs further exploration.

R’ Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov (*Bnei Yissaschar*, Adar 1:8-9) explains that the month of Adar is represented by the nose and the accompanying sense of smell. It is thus fitting that the names of both the hero and heroine of the story, Mordechai, the pungent *mor d’ror*, and Esther, *hi hadassah*, the aromatic myrtle plant, represent distinct scents. Fascinatingly, the Bnei Yissaschar explains that the sin of Adam and Chava involved the faculties of touch, sight, taste, and hearing, and the only sense that maintained its innocence was the pure and untarnished sense of smell, which played no role in man’s first failing. Mordechai and Esther, and their aromatic namesakes, are thus a fitting match for Haman’s camp, symbolizing the consequential chaos of the sin in Gan Eden.

The power of *besamim*, sweet fragrances, seems to be the only weapon to dice through the confusion

perpetuated by Amalek. Indeed, it is the only sense that provides pleasure directly to the soul, bypassing the physical body. The *besamim* of Havdalah are “*hamadvil*,” they are differentiators. They clear the fog. They provide spiritual lucidity. They negate the debilitating psychological effects of Amalek.

May we merit to perceive God’s hand in our lives with unadulterated clarity, to dissolve the clouds of doubt promoted by the ideology of Amalek, and to inhale the sublime fragrances of the *avodah* of the Beit HaMikdash, speedily in our days.



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HAMAN'S FIGHT FOR ESAV'S LEGACY

Reading through the Megillah, it seems that Haman's outrage with Mordechai was sparked by Mordechai's simple refusal to bow. However, a close reading of the text signifies that there was a much more significant dynamic at play.

In the aftermath of the stolen bracha, Rivka instructed Yaakov to flee to Lavan's house until Esav's anger dissipated. It was not until Hashem instructed Yaakov to leave Lavan's house that Yaakov ventured back to his homeland. Since there was no assurance that Esav's anger had subsided, Yaakov believed that he would encounter Esav, and a deadly battle would take place. Out of excessive caution, Yaakov prepared himself in every way possible to spare his life and the lives of his wives and children. It is noteworthy that despite praying, preparing for



war, and sending a significant gift to Esav, it was the simple act of bowing that ultimately appeased Esav. Rashi (Bereishit 33:4), quoting *Bereishit Rabbah*, explains:

נתגלגלו רחמיו כשראהו משתחוה כל השתחאוות הללו.

His (Esav's) mercy was moved forth when he saw him (Yaakov) bowing with all of these bows.

Rashi quotes the *Sifri* and further explains:

אמר רבי שמעון בר יוחאי הלכה היא בידוע שעשו שונא ליעקב, אלא שנכמרו רחמיו באותו שעה, ונשקו בכל לבו.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai said: It is a known fact that Esav hates Yaakov, but his mercy was warmed at that time, and he kissed him with all of his heart.

These midrashim demonstrate how significant Yaakov's act of bowing was before Esav. Even though Esav bore a lethal grudge against Yaakov, his compassion was stirred to brotherly love and mercy when "he witnessed Yaakov prostrating himself." Centuries later, it was this same act of prostrating that reappears in the dynamic between the descendants of Yaakov and Esav.

וירא המן כי אין מרדכי כרע ומשתחוה לו וימלא המן חמה. ויבו בעיניו לשלוח יד במרדכי לבדו כי הגידו לו את עם מרדכי ויבקש המן להשמיד את כל היהודים אשר בכל מלכות אחשורוש עם מרדכי.

Haman saw that Mordechai would not bow down or prostrate himself to him and Haman was filled with wrath. But it seemed contemptible to lay hands on Mordechai alone, for they had told him Mordechai's nationality. So Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the entire kingdom of Achashvayrosh, the people of Mordechai.
Esther 3:5-6

We must ask: Why did Mordechai's specific refusal to bow to Haman elicit such a drastic response from Haman? Additionally, if Haman deemed it improbable to succeed in laying hands on Mordechai alone, why would Haman think he would actually succeed in destroying the Jewish people?

The Megillah records Haman's frustration with Mordechai using the words *vayivez b'einav* (it seemed contemptible). There are only two instances in Tanach where the word *vayivez* is used. The first case is after Esav sold his *bechora* to Yaakov. There, the Torah informs us:

...ויבז עשו את הבכורה.

And Esav scorned the birthright.

Bereishit 25:34

The *Ba'al HaTurim* comments:

ויבז. ב' - ויבז עשו, ויבז בעיניו גבי המן. דהינו, בוחה בן בוחה, זה המן הרשע שיצא מעשו.
*We find the word *vayivez* twice. Once regarding Esav, "And Esav scorned" and "It seemed contemptible" regarding Haman. Meaning a scorner, the son of a scorner, this is the evil Haman who descended from Esav.*

Haman, a direct descendant of Esav, mirrored the actions of Esav. Esav was a scorner and Haman continued this disgraceful legacy. By specifically using the word *vayivez*, we learn that there is an inherent connection between the sale of the *bechora* and Haman's endeavor to wipe out Mordechai's nation.

When selling the *bechora* to Yaakov, Esav reasoned that the *bechora* was of no use to him. Rashi explains that Esav understood that the *bechora* was a spiritual privilege that granted the chosen nation the right to serve Hashem in the Beit HaMikdash. Both Yaakov and Esav understood that Esav was unbecoming and ill-suited for this role. Hence, Esav sold away his *bechora* and scoffed at the matter.

When Esav later realized that he had not simply sold the rights to spiritual privilege, but he had also squandered

the ability to prevail above his brother, he quickly regretted his decision and detested Yaakov for it. Esav woefully beseeched his father:

...הברכה אחת היא לך אבי ברכני גם אני אבי וישא עשו קלו ויברך.

"Is there but one blessing to you my father? Bless me too, my father." Esav raised his voice and wept.

Bereishit 27:38

Esav begged for an alternative to the fate that had just been gifted to Yaakov. Conditionally, Yitzchak answered Esav:

"...ואת אחיך תעבד והיה כאשר תריד ופרקת עלו מעל צוארך"

You shall serve your brother, yet it shall be that when you will be aggrieved, you may remove his yoke from upon your neck.

Bereishit 27:40

Rashi clarifies:

...כלומר: כשיעברו ישראל על התורה ויהיה לך פתחון פה להצטער על הברכות שנטל ופרקת עלו וגו'.

As if to say, Yitzchak meant: When Yisrael will transgress the laws of the Torah, and you will have a claim to be aggrieved over the blessings that Yaakov took, "You may remove his yoke, etc."



Not only did the Jewish community demonstrate that they did not deserve a return to Zion and worship in the Beit HaMikdash, they seemed apathetic, and happy with their state of exile.

The Book of Esther opens with a shocking impression of the Jews of Persia. Achashveirosh hosted a party to celebrate the continued exile of the Jewish people. Except for Mordechai, the Jewish community was present at this celebration, where the exiled utensils of the Beit HaMikdash adorned Achashveirosh's table. Not only did the Jewish community demonstrate that they did not deserve a return to Zion and worship in the Beit HaMikdash, they seemed apathetic, and happy with their state of exile.

Since the Jews had thrown off the yoke of Torah, Haman sensed that this would be his chance to exact revenge on Mordechai and the entire nation as well. Haman intuitively understood that if Mordechai was refusing to prostrate himself before Esav's descendants, then this should have been under circumstances when Yaakov's descendants were following the laws of the Torah. Given the current state of *churban* and the exiled Jews, Mordechai had no right to turn down Haman's request to prostrate himself.

This would precisely be the claim that Haman would use when attempting to destroy Mordechai's

entire nation. He understood that this was not only a personal vendetta between himself and Mordechai, but a continuation of Esav's claim against Yaakov. Haman understood that this situation reflected the deeper dynamics granted by the blessing of the *bechora*. The *bechora* only entitles Yaakov sovereignty over Esav when Israel follows the laws of the Torah and demonstrates an earnest desire to serve Hashem in the Beit HaMikdash. However, when Israel transgresses the Torah and participates in a celebration over the continued ruin of the Beit HaMikdash, Esav may be aggrieved over the blessings that Yaakov took and may remove his yoke. As Haman witnessed Mordechai's refusal to bow, the very act that stirred Esav's compassion awakened his vengeance to survey the Jewish nation and conclude that Israel no longer had rights to the *bechora*. Haman assumed that he would be successful in eliminating the nation and throwing off the yoke of Yaakov.

Nonetheless, as the situation in Shushan unfolded, the Persian Jews were stirred to do *teshuvah*. While Haman may have correctly assessed that momentarily the Jews did not deserve the privileges and protection granted to them, he did not foresee

the national *teshuva* movement that would ensue.

Ultimately, *hasin'ah kilkela et hashura*, his hatred caused his downfall and Haman was subjected to the conditions of Yaakov's *bracha*. While he was fully versed in Esav's blessing, he seemed to have forgotten the way Yitzchak had blessed Yaakov:

"ארריך ארור ומברכך ברוך..."

Those who curse you will be cursed, and those who bless you will be blessed.

Bereishit 27:29



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COINCIDENCE? I THINK NOT: THE LESSON OF AMALEK

There is a well-known video clip that opens with a scene in Thailand, as a less fortunate boy is caught stealing pain medication for his sick mother. When the owner of a soup bodega sees the commotion, he comes over and pays for the medication and tells his daughter to get the boy soup for his mother. Fast forward 30 years, and this same bodega owner is filling orders, and after giving a free soup to a homeless person, this kind man has a heart attack. After being rushed to the hospital for an emergency surgery, this man's daughter is left with a 792,000 baht hospital bill (the equivalent of \$24,300), and has to figure out how



to pay. With no other option, the daughter puts their bodega up for sale. Waiting by her father's bedside, she wakes up to find a letter. Inside, the letter there is a list of all of the

medical expenses, with each line item now showing 0 baht. The bottom of the document says, "paid for with an onion soup and pack of pain medication."

There are two ways to look at this powerful and moving clip. We can say this is a clear act of *midah k'neged midah*, of cause and effect, or we can say this was all one big coincidence.

When looking at the *pesukim* for Parashat Zachor, there a variety of things we learn.

זְכוֹר אֶת אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה לְךָ עַמְלֵק בְּדֶרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְךָ מִמִּצְרָיִם
מִמִּצְרָיִם. יַחַד אֲשֶׁר קָרָה בְּדֶרֶךְ וַיִּזְנֶב בְּךָ כָּל-
הַנְּחֹשָׁשִׁים אֲחֲרֶיךָ וְאֶתְהָ עָנָה וַיִּגַּע וְלֹא יָרָא
אֱלֹקִים: יֵשׁ. וְהָיָה בְּהַנִּיחַ ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ לְךָ מִכָּל-

אִיבִיד מִסָּבִיב בְּאָרְץ אֲשֶׁר ה'־אֵלֶיךָ נָתַן לָךְ
 נִחְלָה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ תִּמְחָה אֶת־זִכְר עֲמֶלְק מִתַּחַת
 הַשָּׁמַיִם לֹא תִשְׁכַּח:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt — how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!

From the first pasuk we learn the obligation to remember what Amalek did to us. You may wonder, what exactly did Amalek do to us? The second pasuk describes the way Amalek ambushed us, attacking the weak from behind. The final pasuk of Parashat Zachor ends with a seemingly contradictory commandment. After commanding us to remember that which Amalek did to us, the final verse commands us to erase the memory of Amalek. How can we understand this obvious contradiction?



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To answer this contradiction, we must first understand what was so bad about Amalek’s actions.

Rashi sheds light on the depth of Amalek’s actions with a mere two words. Rashi tells us that “*asher korcha*” means “*leshon mikreh*” — happenstance. Amalek believed everything was simply a coincidence, and that it was just a coincidence that they attacked when they did. However, it is difficult to understand how it could be a coincidence given the way Amalek attacked us, and when they attacked us. As the pasuk describes, Amalek attacked us from behind, showing it was a planned ambush, not some coincidental turn of events.

We may ask, even if it is true that it is hard to believe that Amalek’s attack was simply a coincidence, how does that merit labeling Amalek as enemy number one, as our greatest enemy?

Rav Shamshon Rephael Hirsch explains that if we pay close attention to the context of this attack, and the way the attack was carried out as quoted in the pesukim, we will pick up on a fundamental theme. As discussed, Amalek attacked us from behind, attacking the weakest members of our formation. Ok, so it is an ambush. Does that make them the worst people in the world? Yes, it does. Ambushing us shows that Amalek was only afraid of one thing — people — but not Hashem. As the pasuk clearly states, Amalek attacked “**undeterred by fear of God.**”

We see this same theme when we pay attention to the timeline of Amalek’s attack. Amalek attacked the Jews following the *makkot* and *keriyat Yam Suf*, and no other nation was willing to start up with them. In the same

Rashi that was mentioned earlier, he offers another explanation for *korcha*, coming from the word *kar*, as in cold. Quoting the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Rashi explains that Amalek “cooled” us down, since every nation was afraid to start up with us, and by fighting us, they showed that it is possible to pick a battle with us. Rashi explains it with a parable of a boiling bath that no one could possibly immerse in, and a *ben b’lia’al*, a good for nothing, jumps in. While this crazy person burns himself, he does make the bath more accessible for others. Rav Hirsch explains that by doing this, Amalek represented the idea of not forfeiting to a greater being, but rather acting based on their own thinking. It is one thing to think they can do whatever they want, but another to act on it.

Simply put, by attacking us when they did, and how they did, Amalek was attempting to send one message: the Jewish people are not more special because they have the Almighty on their side, because there is no supreme power controlling the events of the world. **There is no such thing as God, everything is one big coincidence.** *Asher korcha baderech*, they happened to have been in the right place at the right time. Nothing is or was orchestrated by Hashem.

We see this same theme of coincidence with Amalek in the haftarah we read for Parashat Zachor. In the haftarah we discuss Shaul’s error in allowing Agag and other Amalekis to live. The haftarah ends there, but the story does not. At the end of Shaul’s life, in the first perek of Shmuel II, the navi describes how David Hamelech found out that Shaul was dead. It describes a conversation David had with the informant, a little boy. The pasuk states:

וַיֹּאמֶר הַנֶּעֱר הַמְּגִיד לוֹ נִקְרָא נִקְרִיתִי בְּהַר
הַגִּלְבֹּעַ וְהָיָה שְׂאוֹל נֹשֵׁן עַל־חַנְיָתוֹ וְהָיָה הָרֶכֶב
וּבָעָלֵי הַפָּרָשִׁים הַדֹּבְקָהוּ.

The young man who brought him the news answered, “I happened to be at Mount Gilboa, and I saw Shaul leaning on his spear, and the chariots and horsemen closing in on him.”

The boy continues to tell David that Shaul called him to come, and the boy came, and when Shaul asked who he was, he responded he was from Amalek, and Shaul asked the boy to kill him and end his suffering. Shaul’s grave sin was leaving Agag, the king of the Amalekim alive, and Shaul’s life was ended by an Amaleki, and yet how does this boy view this clear act of *midah k’neged midah*? As the verse states, “*nikro nikreiti*,” “I happened to be there” — all one big coincidence.

Rav Hirsch uses this idea to help answer our original contradiction. It is true, Parashat Zachor starts off with the command to remember what Amalek did to us, and ends with the command to erase their memory, but it is no contradiction. The initial command to remember

what they did to us is a command to remember what they did, because of what the attack stands for, which is what Amalek stands for: everything is a coincidence, there is no God controlling the events of the world. The reason we need to remember this is to properly *timcheh et zecher*, eradicate this ideology from our lives. It is so easy to view the events of our lives as a coincidence. It is easy to look at a doctor saving the person who had helped save his mother 30 years earlier as one big coincidence. However, that is exactly what Amalek wants us to believe, and the Torah, in recognizing this, commands us to remember how easy it is to fall prey to the Amalek mentality. We need to remember what they stand for so that we can erase this ideology from our beliefs.

We read Parashat Zachor every year before Purim to help us get in the right mindset of what the Purim story is all about. Haman, also a descendant of Amalek, tried to destroy the Jews through a lottery, which is the definition of chance, of coincidence, to show his complete

rejection of Hashem and His people. Throughout the Purim story, without mention of Hashem, and the various turns of events, it is easy for us to read the story in the way Amalek would want us to, and simply see it as one big coincidence. Therefore, we read Parashat Zachor to help us understand the true way of looking at things, to not get fooled by the exterior, and to look deeper into every aspect of the Megillah, and *megaleh*, reveal, the hand of Hashem in every aspect of the story.

May we all merit to properly fulfill the commandment of *zachor*, so we can properly fulfill the mitzvot of Purim, all of which focus on this one goal of illuminating the hand of Hashem in our lives. We want to get to a point where we are *ad d’lo yada*, where we don’t know the reason everything happens in our lives, but we trust that it is no coincidence, and we can trust in Hashem to take care of us, and reach the greatest heights of simcha. Through that, we hope to merit seeing the coming of Moshiach speedily in our days.





MOSHE RABBEINU AND PURIM: ALWAYS YEARNING FOR MORE

The Megillah recounts that Haman conducted a lottery to determine the month he would carry out his genocide of the Jewish people. Of course, the lottery fell on Adar and Haman was exceedingly happy. The Gemara (*Megillah* 13b) explains that Haman was elated because Adar was the month of Moshe Rabbeinu's passing. Moshe's passing indicated an ominous time for the Jewish people, which made Haman confident that his plot would be successful. We know, however, that Haman was uninformed, because he did not know that Adar was also the month that Moshe Rabbeinu was born, making that month, in fact, an opportune time for the Jewish people. This Gemara establishes a connection between Moshe Rabbeinu and the Purim story.

The Gemara (*Chullin* 139b) asks where in the Torah is there an allusion to Moshe. Now obviously, Moshe is all over the Torah. The Gemara is really



asking about an allusion to Moshe *before* his birth. After citing a verse in Parshas Bereishis (6:3), the Gemara goes on to ask where allusions to Haman, Esther and Mordechai are found in the Torah. The Maharsha (*Chullin* 139) says it must be that Moshe Rabbeinu is connected to the Purim Story. The question is, how and in what way?

R' Aharon Kotler (*Mishnas Rebbe Aharon*, Vol. 1, pg. 103-4) says we first need to look at one of the other

characters in the Purim story — Haman — and the *drasha* the Gemara utilizes to show the allusion to him in the Torah. The Gemara wonders where Haman is alluded to in the Torah and concludes that he is found in the context of Adam HaRishon and the sin of the Tree of Knowledge, where the Torah (*Bereishis*, 3:11) says, “*hamin ha'eitz asher tzivisicha lvilti achol mimenu achalta*” (did you eat from this tree about which I commanded you not to eat?). R' Aharon explains that Adam could do anything he wanted and could eat anything he wanted — except fruit of the *eitz hada'as*. Similarly, it says in the Megillah (5:9) “*Vayeitzei Haman bayom ha'hu samaech v'tov lev*” (Haman went out that day happy and satisfied). Chazal say that because Haman was getting a promotion, it was the first time he experienced real happiness. The king was elevating his status, yet this didn't satisfy him. Haman wanted more *kavod*. We know

Haman famously remarks (5:13), “*v’chol ze einenu shoveh li.*” All Haman had accomplished, all he had acquired, was of no value to him. Although everyone bowed to him, Mordechai did not, and this greatly distressed Haman. Nothing he had was of value, as long as Mordechai was there and would not bow. Adam and Haman had something in common: neither was fully satisfied with his lot.

If we take a step back, however, the Gemara could have made another, more intuitive *drasha*. The Gemara could have made a *drasha* based on *ha-man*, as in the manna. After all, phonetically, it’s more similar to Haman than “*hamin ha’etz.*” But in truth, this could not have been the *drasha*, because the manna represented everything that was the opposite of Haman. The manna represented having enough, being satisfied, and recognizing that everything comes from Hashem.

Chazal (*Taanis* 9a) teach us that there were three sustainers, or *parnasim*, for the Jews while we traveled through the desert. (1) The Jewish people were protected by the Clouds of Glory in the merit of Aharon. (2) The miraculous well that followed the Jews and provided them with fresh water was in the merit of Miriam. (3) And, for forty years, the heavenly manna fell in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu. The manna represents having enough. The Torah (Shemos 16) even tells us how Hashem said he will “rain down the manna from the heavens and everyone will take what they need for the day...” They were told to “collect it according to one’s eating capacity...” The Torah tells us that the people did just that; some took a lot while others took less. Yet, those who gathered excessive portions of manna did not have leftovers, and those who gathered only

a little did not lack. Whatever amount of manna was gathered provided the perfect amount for each family.

While Moshe represented the notion of *histapkus*, being satisfied with what he had, this attribute pertained only to material matters. When it came to spiritual endeavors, Moshe was never satisfied. He always wanted more; whether it was to go into Eretz Yisrael to perform the mitzvos dependent upon the Land of Israel or setting up cities of refuge (*arei miklat*) on the east side of the Jordan River, even though they wouldn’t take effect until the cities of refuge in Eretz Yisrael were established. He always wanted more — but in spiritual matters. This is why the Gemara (*Makkos* 10a) says that “One who loves money is never satisfied” (Koheles 5:9) refers to Moshe Rabbeinu and his spiritual pursuits.

Perhaps this is the ultimate connection between Moshe Rabbeinu and Purim, since Purim is the day Klal Yisrael reaccepted the Torah. Many are familiar with the oft-cited, yet troubling Gemara regarding Kabbalas HaTorah. The Gemara (*Shabbos* 88a) cites the pasuk, “they stood at the bottom (*tachtit*) of the mountain” (Shemos 19:17). Rav Avdimi bar Chama explains that we learn from here that Hashem held the mountain over the Jewish people like a barrel. He said: If you accept the Torah, good, but if not, you will be buried there. Rav Acha bar Yaakov argues that if the Jewish people were under such duress, they have a legitimate defense against the enforceability of the Torah. Rashi explains that upon reaching the heavenly court, we could use the excuse that we were coerced into accepting the Torah altogether! However, Rava explains that this is no longer a concern because the Jewish people reaccepted the Torah in the

days of Achashveirosh, as it says “*kiymu vikiblu,*” *kiymu ma sh’kiblu kvar,*” they recommitted themselves to what they had accepted many years ago.

The question is, when, where, and how did we reaccept the Torah? How did Chazal learn that we accepted the entire Torah from the Purim story? The Maharal (*Gur Aryeh*, Yisro, 19:22) explains, based on the Gemara (*Shavuos* 39a, *Megillah* 14a), that by accepting the mitzvah of *mikra megillah*, the Jews reaffirmed their commitment to the rest of the Torah. We wouldn’t have “added” another mitzvah if we had not accepted all the others.

Today, we don’t simply celebrate miracles from yesteryear; we reexperience them. This is reflected in one of the berachos we say on the reading of the Megillah: ... *she’asa nisim lavoseinu bayamim haheim ba’zman ha’zeh.* Purim is when the Jews wanted more spirituality and reaccepted the Torah. Purim is the time for us to do the same, to accept the Torah anew.

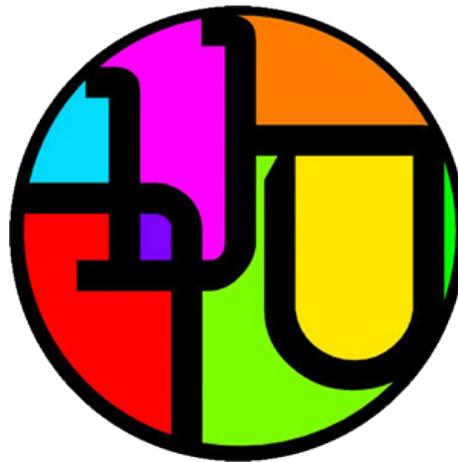
How can each of us emulate the Jews of the Megillah and accept the Torah anew? While we cannot create new mitzvos or conjure up new rabbinic decrees, each of us can identify a specific mitzvah we can observe more carefully, with added meaning or excitement. We can learn the halachos on how to perform that mitzvah in the best way possible, and then practice what we learn. In that way, we, in essence, are showing a renewed commitment to the Torah and accepting the Torah anew, as did our ancestors in the days of Achashveirosh. Purim is our opportunity to affirm our legacy of Torah and spiritual renewal, leading to our ultimate redemption.



OVERLOOKING EZRA: REACCEPTING THE TORAH IN MEGILLAT ESTHER

The notion that the Jewish people went through a second, *superior* acceptance of the Torah, hundreds of years after the public revelation at Sinai is, in and of itself, astonishing. And yet, this is in fact what the *amora* Rava claims in *b. Shabbat* 88a. Citing from Esther 9:27, he argues that although the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai was coerced, the Jewish people reaccepted it during the time of Ahashverosh.

הדור קבלוהּ בימי אַחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ דְּכַתִּיב "קִיְמוּ וְקִבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים" קִיְמוּ מִה שֶׁקִּבְּלוּ כְּבָר.
 Furthermore, they accepted it in the time of Ahashverosh, as it is written, "The Jews ordained, and took upon themselves" [meaning that] they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.



The idea that in the aftermath of rejection, as demonstrated by exile and the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash, the Jewish people would be able to recommit themselves to the Torah and to the covenant with God, is inspirational. Somewhat shocking,

however, is the choice of the Purim story as the locus of this reacceptance of the Torah. The explicit context of Esther 9:27 is the acceptance of the observance of Purim, yet Rava recontextualizes it to refer to the Torah itself. While this is an interesting exegetical move, it is quite puzzling that Rava overlooked a more obvious source.

In the midst of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, as described in the book of Nehemiah, the Jews who had returned to Judea after the Babylonian exile gathered together in Jerusalem. There, Ezra read aloud from the Torah and the people rededicated themselves to the observance of its laws. This is all described in vivid detail in Nehemiah 8. Why would Rava have ignored

this episode in Nehemiah in favor of Esther?

The question becomes a bit sharper when we take into account the following:

- 1) The account in Nehemiah is a formal acceptance of the Torah, as opposed to Rava's source, which seemingly takes the *pasuk* in Esther out of context.
- 2) Reference to God is conspicuously absent from the book of Esther, while God is invoked throughout the Nehemiah narrative.
- 3) Both stories occur in a similar time period. Regardless of the historical dating of both stories, Hazal themselves associate Mordechai and Esther with the time period of Ezra and Nehemiah.¹
- 4) The language describing Jewish unity in Nehemiah 8 mirrors Hazal's language used to describe mattan Torah. In Nehemiah 8:1, the people come "*ke-ish ehad*" to hear the Torah read by Ezra, which is very similar to the comments found in *Mekhilta deRabi Yishmael* 19:2 referring to the revelation at Sinai: *kan hishvu kulam lev ehad*. This is more widely known from Rashi's reformulation, *ke-ish ehad be-lev ehad*.
- 5) The celebration of Purim, as described in the Megillah, carries with it seemingly unique elements that seem to foster unity, and extend the celebration to those less fortunate. Esther 9:22 describes Purim as *ימי משתה ושמחה ומשלה מנות איש לרעהו ומתנות לאבנינים* "days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor." Yet Nehemiah 8 has those as well. At the end of the ceremony, Ezra (or Nehemiah) tells

the people gathered, "אכלו משמנים ושתו", ממתיקים ושלחו מנות לאין גבון, Go, eat choice foods and drink sweet drinks and send portions to whoever has nothing prepared." Both celebrations include **feasting, gift giving, and concern for the poor.**

The account in Nehemiah 8 seems to be the obvious choice, so why did Rava ignore it?

We could argue that from a purely ideological perspective, the Bavli may have preferred to set the recommitment to the Torah in Persia, its center of Jewish life, as opposed to associating it with an individual (Ezra) who *left* the diaspora to move to Israel. Yet, the Bavli on many occasions praises Ezra, arguing that Ezra was worthy of having received the Torah if not for the fact that Moshe preceded him,² and crediting Ezra for the restoration of the Torah.³ If so, that only strengthens the question — why did Rava ignore the recommitment to the Torah during the time of Ezra, a figure who according to Hazal was on the same level as Moshe, instead choosing to stretch the meaning of a *pasuk* in the Megillah, in order to associate it with the Purim story?

I would argue that it is precisely the *differences* between the stories that make the Megillah a more attractive setting for the reacceptance of the Torah. The points of *contact* between Nehemiah 8 and Esther 9 allow us to read the stories together, and in fact, see the stark points of *contrast*.

- 1) While it is true that both Nehemiah 8 and Esther 9 describe the Jews celebrating in similar ways, their emotional state is strikingly different. In Esther, the Megillah goes out of its way to highlight the happiness of the Jews in the aftermath

of their salvation. It is the move from *yagon*, grief, to *simhah*, happiness, as described in Esther 9:22 that leads to their acceptance of Purim and the observance of its laws (and by extension, according to Rava, the Torah as a whole). Whereas, in Nehemiah 9:22 the immediate reaction of the people to hearing the words of the Torah is the opposite. *כי בוכים כל־העם כְּשִׁמְעָם אֶת־דְּבַר־יְהוָה*, "for all the people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Torah." They had recognized that they had fallen so far from what they had been charged with, and reacted with sadness. It is only after Ezra, Nehemiah and all of the gathered Levites encourage the people to celebrate, that they do. Thus, the Esther story emphasizes the happiness of the Jews' acceptance, which contrasts sharply with the sadness of the Nehemiah story, and the *fear* (and coercion) that accompanied *mattan Torah*.

- 2) The recommitment to the Torah in Nehemiah 8 was somewhat short lived. Only a few years later, as described in Nehemiah 13, the people



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had started to backslide, transgressing precisely those commandments they had previously sworn to uphold. While a flashy and symbolic expression of commitment can be impressive, it is not always sustainable. The Megillah, on the other hand, places a strong emphasis on continual observance. As Esther 9:27, precisely the *pasuk* that Rava cites, states, קִיְמוּ וְקַבְּלוּ הַיְהוּדִים עָלֵיהֶם וְעַל־זֶרְעָם וְעַל כָּל־הַנְּלוּיִם עָלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יַעֲבוּר לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכִזְמָנָם בְּכָל־שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה “the Jews undertook and **irrevocably** obligated themselves **and their descendants**, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time **each year.**” The very next *pasuk* emphasizes this as well, highlighting the observance in every generation. The sustainability of this commitment, which came *without* pomp and circumstance, is what is remarkable.

3) Though Nehemiah 8 describes the people present at the ceremony as כל העם — the *entire* nation — they were, in reality, a much smaller group. The fact that the book of Nehemiah provides lists of the many returnees to Judea belies the fact that a majority of the Jewish people were, in fact, not present at this rededication, or in Judea at all. Contrast that to the Megillah where the events of the story affected Jewry worldwide. Not only that, but while the Nehemiah story emphasizes separation from others,⁴ the Esther story emphasizes coming together. The Megillah goes out of its way to emphasize the commitment not just of current Jews, but of *al kol ha-nilvim aleihem*, “all those who might join them.”⁵ Thus, as opposed to Nehemiah, which presents a limited group committing themselves to the Torah, those presented in the Megillah

span the globe, including Jews not yet born and those who have not yet chosen to join the Jewish people.

4) Finally, there was an active effort in the Megillah to reach out to Jewry worldwide. Not only did Mordechai and Esther send letters to Jewish communities in the first year after their salvation (Esther 9:10), but they sent them *again* the second year (Esther 9:29). This, again, stands in contrast with Nehemiah. While it certainly is admirable that the people themselves gathered on their own in Jerusalem, and asked Ezra to read from the Torah, there was no attempt to reach out to other communities to join in this reaffirmation.⁶

How do we *improve* upon mattan Torah? The question itself may seem ridiculous, if not presumptuous. Yet that is precisely what Rava attempted to address. But instead of pointing to another instance of a formal acceptance of the Torah, Rava opted to focus on a less intuitive event. Emulating previous commitments is not enough. It is precisely the Purim story, with its emphasis on *simhah*, sustainability, unity and outreach, that elevates its version of a recommitment to the Torah. It is not merely about recognizing our shortcomings or seeking out God, even when He is not *explicitly* mentioned. It is about actively making a sustained effort, reaching out to others, and doing it *besimhah*.⁷ Rava’s reading of the *pesukim* may not be the most obvious, but it presents a clear way for us to rededicate ourselves to Torah.

Endnotes

1. See *b. Meg.* 16b, which understands the Mordechai mentioned in Ezra 2:2 as the Mordechai of the book of Esther, *y. Meg.* 1:5, *b. BB* 15a, and Rashi loc. cit. Rambam

in his introduction to his *Mishneh Torah* describes the *knesset hagedolah* as the *beit din* of Ezra, and lists Mordechai as a member. The Ramban and the Ran, in their commentaries on *b. Shabbat* 88a, both argue that Rava was in fact referencing the ceremony in Nehemiah 8. However, that raises a similar question, as to why Rava would not explicitly note that, opting instead to focus on a *pasuk* from Esther.

2. *b. San.* 21b, *t. San.* 4:5. ראוי היה עזרא שתינתן תורה על ידו אלמלא קדמו משנה.

3. *b. Suk.* 20a. כשנשתכחה תורה מישראל. — עלה עזרא מבבל ויסדה.

4. See Nehemiah 10 and 13. While this separation is in accordance with the Torah, nevertheless, the emphasis here is on disunion.

5. This, again, is precisely in the *pasuk* which Rava cites. These are most likely converts, as per most traditional commentaries, for example, ibn Ezra. This is not the first time the Megillah notes other groups associating themselves with Jews. See Esther 8:17.

6. This also stands in contrast with the attempt of Hizkiyahu, to rededicate the people to the Torah. Though the king of Judah, he sends messengers, with letters (אגרות), similar to those sent in the *megillah*) to the remnants of the northern tribes, inviting them to Jerusalem for *Pesah* and to rededicate themselves to God, and were received with laughter and jeering. He did not make a second attempt.

7. That isn’t to say that a formal dedication isn’t important. Rava’s comments are about a rededication. In order to rededicate oneself to something, the underlying first commitment, however flawed, must be present.



SINAH AND AHAVA LISHMA

The Jewish people served as slaves in Egypt for at least two hundred years. The Torah tells us that the labor was backbreaking and intense:

ויעבדו מצרים את בני ישראל בפרך. וימררו את חייהם בעבדה קשה בחמר ובלבנים ובכל עבדה בשדה את כל עבדתם אשר עבדו בהם בפרך.

The Egyptians ruthlessly made the Children of Israel labor. They made their lives bitter with hard labor in mortar and in brick and in all kinds of labor in the field, all their labor in which they ruthlessly made them serve.

Shemot 1:13–14

Pharaoh even ratcheted up the slavery by murdering Jewish babies. Yet, while the Torah enjoins us to eternally remember that we were slaves in Egypt, and many of the mitzvot



that we perform are based on that memory, we have no obligation vis-a-vis the Egyptians themselves. There is no requirement to despise all those descendants of Pharaoh and his ilk, nor to hate the Egyptian people. The only possible gesture toward hatred is the prohibition to live in Egypt (Devarim 17:16).

Not so with Amalek. Though the Amalekites never enslaved us and their attempts to seriously injure the Jewish people were repelled (Shemot 17:13), their ignominious attack must never be forgotten:

ויאמר ה' אל משה כתב זאת זכרון בספר ושים באזני יהושע כי מחה אמהה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים. ויבן משה מזבח ויקרא שמו ה' נסי. ויאמר פי יד על פס ה-ה מלחמה לה' בעמלק מדר דר.

Hashem said to Moshe, "Write this for a memorial in a book, and rehearse it in the ears of Yehoshua: that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under the sky." Moshe built an altar, and called its name Hashem our Banner. He said, "Yah has sworn: 'Hashem will have war with Amalek from generation to generation.'" Shemot 17:14–16

Despite their only marginal success, the Torah nonetheless marks Amalek as the eternal enemy of the Jewish people with a clear demand and requirement that they and their memory be wiped from the map. It is an intensity reserved for this nation to the exclusion of the enslaving Egyptian and other destructive enemies of the Jewish people.

What makes this enemy unique?

Commenting on Amalek's first appearance, the Ramban says:

וטעם העונש שנענש עמלק יותר מכל העמים, בעבור כי כל העמים שמעו וירגזו (שמות טו יד), ופלשת אדום ומואב ויושבי כנען נמוגו (שם) מפני פחד ה' ומהדר גאונו, ועמלק בא ממרחק כמתגבר על השם, ולכך אמר בו ולא ירא אלקים (דברים כה יח), ועוד כי הוא נין עשו וקרוב לנו, עובר מתעבר על ריב לא לו:

The reason Amalek was punished more than other nations was because all the other nations heard [of God's wonders] and shook (Shmot 15:14). The Philistines, Edom, Moab and the dwellers of Canaan were terrified with the fear of God and His greatness. And Amalek came from afar as if more powerful than God. Therefore, it says about them, "they don't fear God" (Devarim 25:18). Further he is the grandson of Esau and close to him and enters into a fight that is not his own.

Reading Ramban carefully, we can see that he points to three factors that mark Amalek as unique among the enemies of God. (1) While the other nations shook with fear, Amalek was emboldened to defeat God. (2) Amalek traveled from a far-off land to enter a battle that was not their own. (3) Amalek is a descendant of Esau.

Egypt matches Amalek in its refusal to fear God. Pharaoh, in his first meeting with Moshe declares (Shemot 5:2):

לא ידעתי את ה' וגם את ישראל לא אשלח "I don't know God nor will I release the Israelites." However, this was Pharaoh's perspective prior to the plagues. After experiencing five plagues, it is only with God's intervention hardening Pharaoh's heart that the king does not back down.

Further, the Jews lived among the Egyptians and Egypt enslaved them out of a (misplaced) fear that these strangers would rise up against them. Amalek, as Ramban notes, had no business with the Jews. They were not local, nor threatening to Amalek lands. Even the argument that they were acting on behalf of Esau is specious since Edom themselves, while they refuse to allow the Israelites through their land, do not attack their distant cousins. It is only Amalek.

Amalek's unfounded, unnecessary, and unprovoked attack marked them as the unique enemy of God. While God rejects the hatred of the Egyptians, Amalek's hatred, which acts without even a modicum of support, evokes a fit of very particular anger from God. Amalek's lack of fear of God led them to attack out of hatred that had no source or inspiration.

The shadow of *sinah lishmah*, hatred for its own sake, undergirds Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews. Mordechai's refusal to bow ignites Haman's anger and a vendetta against Mordechai alone might have been explicable though unfortunate. However, punishing Mordechai alone is insufficient:

וַיֹּאמֶר הֶמֶן לְמֶלֶךְ אַחֲשֻׁרוּשׁ יֵשְׁנוּ עִם אֶחָד מִפְּזָר וּמִפָּרָד בֵּין הָעַמִּים בְּכָל מְדִינֹת מְלָכוּתָךְ וְדַתֵּיהֶם שְׁנוֹת מִכָּל עַם וְאֵת דַּתֵּי הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵינָם עֹשִׂים וְלִמְלָךְ אֵין שׁוּהָ לְהַנִּיחָם.

Haman said to King Ahasuerus: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and

dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws are diverse from those of every people and they do not keep the king's laws; therefore it does not profit the king to leave them."

Esther 3:8

Adopting the craft of his Amalekian ancestors, he chooses unadulterated hatred and seeks to destroy the entirety of the Jewish people.

Megilat Esther celebrates the downfall of Haman and his children. However, it asks us to respond to his unadulterated hate with unadulterated love:

לְקַיֵּם עֲלֵיהֶם לְהַיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר וְאֵת יוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה. כְּיָמִים אֲשֶׁר נָחַו בָּהֶם הַיְּהוּדִים מֵאִיבֵיהֶם וְהַחֲדָשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּךְ לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֲבֵל לְיוֹם טוֹב לְעִשׂוֹת אוֹתָם יְמֵי מִשְׁתֵּה וּשְׂמִיחָה וּמְשֻׁלַּח מְנוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ וּמְתֻנּוֹת לְאֲבֵינָיִם.

To enjoin them that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day, yearly. The days in which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month that was turned for them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor.

Esther 9:21–22

Feasting and gladness are sensible responses to salvation. What prompts the requirement to send gifts neighbors and the poor? These are acts of pure love and brotherhood to counteract the pure hatred of Amalek. This victory over pure hatred occurs when we act out of unconditional love, sending *mishloach manot* and *matanot la-evyonim*.



SHOULD I TAKE THE DAY OFF FROM WORK? THE NATURE OF THE MELACHA PROHIBITION ON PURIM

Perhaps the primary feature of any Jewish festival is its *issur melacha*, the prohibition to engage in forbidden labor. Although Yom Tov, in contrast to Shabbat, allows for *melechet ochel nefesh*, activities necessary for food preparation, such as cooking and baking, the *melacha* prohibition is what endows Yom Tov with its unique sanctity and thus distinguishes it from a typical weekday. How are we to view the concept of *issur melacha* with respect to Purim? Shouldn't Purim's festive character, highlighted by the mitzva of eating a festive meal, reflective of any typical Yom Tov, confer upon it the full status of a Yom Tov? Upon investigation, however,



none of the thirty-nine forbidden labors of Shabbat are technically prohibited, yet the text of Megilat Esther and a passage in the Talmud give Purim an interesting history and a singular status regarding the *melacha* prohibition.

History

At first glance, it seems almost axiomatic that Purim, notwithstanding its Rabbinic origin, be graced with a classic Yom Tov status and its concomitant *issur melacha*. This is highlighted in the text of the Megila itself.

על כן היהודים הפרזים הישבים בערי הפרזות עשים את יום ארבעה עשר לחדש אדר שמחה ומשתה ויום טוב ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו.

Therefore, the village Jews, who live in open cities, observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and make it a day of joy and feasting and Yom Tov."

Esther 9:19

Indeed, the Talmud (*Megila 5a-5b*)

relates that Rebbe (Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi) planted a tree on Purim. The Gemara at first challenges Rebbe's behavior, which seems to violate the first of the thirty-nine *melachot*, on the basis of the aforementioned pasuk, which prominently characterizes Purim as a Yom Tov. The Gemara proceeds to defend Rebbe's practice with several arguments. First, perhaps Rebbe planted the tree on the fifteenth of Adar, Shushan Purim, and Rebbe celebrated Purim along with most Jews, on the fourteenth of Adar. The Gemara rejects this possibility as untenable, since Rebbe lived in Tiveria, which the Gemara assumes had a wall surrounding it from the days of Yehoshua and thus its inhabitants celebrated Purim on the fifteenth of Adar. Although the status of Tiveria is complex, the Gemara concludes that in Rebbe's view there was no doubt that the day of Tiveria's celebration was the fifteenth of Adar. The Gemara concludes that Rebbe must then have planted his tree of the fourteenth of Adar, which was perfectly acceptable since he would only be celebrating Purim the following day.

Rabbah the son of Rava, however, provides another justification for Rebbe's actions. In his view, the Jews during the days of Mordechai and Esther never accepted the prohibition of *melacha* upon themselves. Indeed, this too is reflected in the text of the Megila. In the description of Purim as a Yom Tov (Esther 9:19), just a few pesukim later, the text reads, "to make

them days of feasting and joy" (Esther 9:22). The same descriptions as above of feasting and joy are mentioned but the feature of Yom Tov is absent.

The Gemara then offers a third and final explanation for Rebbe's tree-planting on Purim, explaining that this was some type of planting for joy and celebration and would not fall into the category of a prohibited labor of Yom Tov at all.

In summary then, we have three possible justifications for Rebbe's planting of a tree on Purim: First, Rebbe planted it on the fourteenth of Adar when he was celebrating Purim on the fifteenth. Second, Rebbe was permitted to plant a tree on Purim since there was never an *issur melacha* associated with Purim. Third, Rebbe's planting was not a prohibited *melacha* because it was for simcha purposes.

Custom

Rambam (*Megila* 2:14) and *Tur* (*O.C.* 696:1) both rule that although Purim has certain features of a Yom Tov, there is no *issur melacha*. Nonetheless, Rambam writes:

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

And it is permitted for one to engage in melacha but nonetheless it is improper ("ain ra'uy") to do melacha. And the Sages have said, that anyone who engages in melacha on Purim will not see any blessing from his work.

If we have presumably accepted the second defense of Rebbe's actions, that there never was an *issur melacha* on Purim, then what is the rationale for the rulings of Rambam and *Tur*, that we should be discouraged from engaging in *melacha* on Purim? Additionally, why should we be deprived of the profit earned from our work on Purim?

The Gemara (*Megila* 5b) provides the answer when it relates a story of a man who was sowing flax on Purim, and the Amoraic sage, Rav, cursed him for his behavior. The Gemara wonders, if *melacha* is permitted, why would Rav curse this individual? The Gemara responds that since it was customary in Rav's town to abstain from *melacha* on Purim, one who violates the local custom by permitting something from which the local inhabitants abstain from (assuming there is a logical rationale for the custom, see *Megila* 5b, *Tosafot* s.v. *Devarim*), deserves to be cursed.

Although Rambam and *Tur* merely note the absence of divine blessing from our work, the *Hagahot Maimoni* (400) notes that Rav Achai Gaon (*Vayikra*, *She'ilta* 67) maintains that one who violates local custom in the above manner should be excommunicated. The fact that Rav only cursed the man and did not place a ban upon him, in the view of Rav Achai Gaon, can be explained by the fact that the flax failed to grow and "since the flax did not grow, this is his excommunication" (*ibid*). The source of the severity of violating the



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local custom is the celebrated pasuk in Mishlei (1:8), “*Shema beni mussar avicha ve’al titosh Torat imecha*” — Listen my son to the instruction of your father and do not neglect the teaching of your mother.

Halacha

Although the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 696:1) rules that work is permitted on Purim except in places where the custom has been adopted to abstain from work (and that those who engage in *melacha* will not see any blessing from their work), the Rama (ibid) rules that nowadays, the custom in all places is to abstain from work.

Interestingly, although the Gemara at first mentioned Purim’s status as a Yom Tov and then only seemed to have preserved that status in places where it was customary, nonetheless, even for communities where the custom is to abstain from *melacha* (or according to Rama, all communities), Purim doesn’t ever seem to be characterized as a Yom Tov even with respect to this custom-based *issur melacha*. In fact, Rav Chaim Kanievsky (*Torat Hamoadim* #1) writes that Purim has attained the status of chol hamoed or Erev Pesach after midday in many respects. Questions about laundering and hair and nail cutting become topics of discussion by contemporary authorities.

Additionally, the classic leniencies that are associated with chol hamoed (e.g. potential financial loss of principal known as “*davar ha’aveid*”) would aptly be employed. Of course, as with chol hamoed, any *melacha* that contributes to the joy of the holiday (e.g. driving one’s car to a family Purim seuda) would be permitted and in consonance with the character of the day.

Purim Night

A further discussion involves the issue of *issur melacha* the night of Purim, which hinges on the status of Purim night in the broader scope of the Purim festival. The need to repeat the beracha of Shehecheyanu upon the reading of the Megila during the day, and the fact that we can only fulfill the mitzvot of Purim during the day (as derived from the pasuk “*yemei mishteh vesimcha*,” Esther, 9:22), accents the prominence of the day as the exclusive or at least the primary time for celebration. If, indeed, the custom of abstaining from work on Purim relates to its celebratory Yom Tov status, we could argue that the prohibition of *melacha* be designated as a daytime prohibition only. Additionally, just as the custom of doing *melacha* before midday was based on local custom and restricted only beginning at sunrise on Erev Pesach (See *Pesachim* 50a and *Mishna Berura* O.C. 468:11), logic would dictate that Purim’s customary *melacha* prohibition should follow the same pattern. Thus, even if we would maintain a strict stance regarding laundering and the like, we would be permitted to engage in these *melachot* during the night of Purim without reservation. This, indeed, was the view of Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt”l (*Ashrei Ha’ish*, 3:48:3, *Halichot Vehanhagot Purim*).

Conclusion

The prohibition of *melacha* on Purim has been accepted in all Ashkenazi communities and has its roots in the Gemara’s conception that Purim be given full-fledged Yom Tov status. Although there is room to ease these restrictions on the night of Purim for all, as well as on Purim day for those

who find that abstaining from work would propose a financial hardship (“*davar ha’aveid*”), nonetheless, halacha’s exhortation denying any blessing from our work encourages a day of celebration devoid of mundane activities that may distract us from the requisite celebratory mood necessary for the optimal fulfillment of the mitzva of simcha on Purim.



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