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Preface

Everybody loves Purim. With its celebratory parties, distinctive foods and colorful costumes, Purim is the most festive of all Jewish holidays. The story enralls us as well. A beautiful Jewish woman becomes queen of the Persian Empire and foils an evil plot to destroy her people. It's a story replete with castle intrigue, including a murdered queen, an assassination attempt, a beauty pageant, a villainous royal advisor, a brave heroine and even some Rabbis too! Comic plot twists make it a story unrivaled in all of scripture for sheer entertainment value. One may wonder what this issue of Focus can possibly add to such a beloved and popular holiday.

The answer lies in the fact that the revelry and pageantry of Purim often obscure its deeper meaning. Like every other Jewish holiday, Purim has important things to say. And considering the holiday's historical context—the story takes place at a time when the Jewish people lived outside the land of Israel—Purim's message speaks directly to the American Jewish experience.

Purim addresses the many issues of national exile, from the theological problems of pain, tragedy and divine providence to the practical questions of Jewish unity, identity and survival. Purim is blessed with a unique set of customs and mitzvot, all of which, when properly understood, define the spiritual nature of the day. And let us not forget Megillat Esther. Its thrilling story contains fundamental lessons. No less than any other book of the prophets, it demands serious study.

These issues and more are addressed by this Purim reader. It is guaranteed to add fresh meaning to your Purim celebrations.

As a special bonus, this issue of Focus adds something new to our usual repertoire of articles. From past issues, you've come to expect approachable articles covering the deeper significance of the holiday and a Halachic overview of its observances and traditions. In this issue we present a couple of new elements to that successful formula. First, with great creativity, Rabbi Daniel Steinberg explores pedagogical techniques for carrying over the fun and playfulness of Purim into the study of Jewish text. And second, in recognition of the large Israeli population in the Bay Area, Rabbi Zev Jacobs has graced our pages with a thought-provoking essay elegantly written in Modern Hebrew. If you can read it, we're sure you'll enjoy it!

As always, we are indebted to our consulting editor, Lawrence Galant, for giving so freely of his time. His talent, sensitivity and guidance have been invaluable.

In closing, the JSN wishes to thank Dov and Chaya Hirsh for reviewing our Hebrew usage and Amanda Orrin for her technical assistance in the final stages of this publication.

We wish you and your family a Happy Purim!

Rabbi Joey Felsen
Founder, Jewish Study Network

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon
Editor

Introduction

Purim may be great fun, but at the same time it deals with some very serious issues. To appreciate this holiday properly we need to review some Jewish history. The roots of our story take us all the way back to the end of the First Temple Era.

Jeremiah, the spiritual leader of the Jews at the time, was a master prophet whose reprimands were widely ignored. For years he had warned the Jews that their national security depended on introspection, a change of lifestyle and sincere repentance, all to no avail. The moral disintegration of Jewish society finally reached the point of no return and Jeremiah prophesized the nation's destiny:

Thus said G-d: After seventy years for Babylon have been completed, I will redeem you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.

Jeremiah 29:10

The Jews would be exiled to Babylon for seventy years and then be restored to their land. It was a tragic forecast, but it held hope for the future. Years later, it would be quoted by Daniel and again by Ezra. No one forgot it.

The Babylonians arrive and conquer Israel, destroy the Temple and exile the Jews (circa 421BCE). Soon after, the Babylonian Empire itself fails and is taken over by the Persians who set up a far more tolerant government. Only fifty-two years after the Temple's destruction, Cyrus the Great allows the Jews to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple.

Unfortunately, even this early reprieve was too late. Decades of comfort and success in Babylon rendered many Jews apathetic to the idea of life in the Holy Land. Only a small minority of about 50,000 follow the leadership of Ezra and return home.

The group arrives in Jerusalem and begins construction on the new Temple, only to have the local gentiles violently oppose the project. "Give them their Temple," they warn, "and the Jews will declare independence!" They appeal to the king and construction is halted. Some Jews return to Persia, but most stay on in Israel and make do without a Temple. Years go by.

The 70th anniversary of the exile approaches and Jeremiah's prophecy is on everyone's mind.

Achashveirosh (Xerxes), the king of the Persian Empire, is concerned. Will the prophecy materialize? Will the Jews declare independence? He miscalculates the years and mistakenly thinks that the seventieth year has passed without effect. Thrilled that his Empire has remained intact, he invites his governors to join him for an extravagant celebration of national unity. Then he throws another party for the citizens of Shushan, the capital city.

Ignoring the protestations of their sages, many local Jews attend this celebration of their exile and subjugation. It seems that some saw themselves as Persian citizens rather than Israeli refugees. Lacking faith in Jeremiah's prophecy, these Jews had given up on redemption. At the party, they stood by and watched as Achashveirosh used the holy vessels plundered from their Temple; vessels inherited from his predecessors, the Babylonians. This was a low point for Jewish pride and a sin that G-d could not ignore. If the Jews have lost sight of their identity and mission, what is the point of their continued existence?

Soon after the partying ends, Achashveirosh appoints a new royal advisor, Haman. Together they plot the annihilation of the Jews, but they fail to recognize the new power in palace: Queen Esther. She inspires her brethren to repentance and succeeds in nullifying the evil decree. A few years later Darius II ascends to the throne and allows the Jews to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. The prophecy of Jeremiah is fulfilled and a new, glorious epoch of our history begins. Seventy years after the Temple's destruction and the exile of the nation, the Jews are back in business.

The holiday of Purim celebrates the salvation of the Jewish people from an existential threat, but it is a lot more than that. Purim affirms our eternal relationship with Israel, it underscores the importance of Jewish pride and identity in exile, and it teaches us never to lose hope, even when all is dark.

In a word, Purim is about faith.

The Shekel Tax:

Forging Unity with Coins of Fire

Rabbi Joey Felsen

In the times of the Jerusalem Temple, there was a yearly communal tax of a half Shekel.¹ Every year, at the beginning of the month of Adar, a proclamation was made to remind the Jewish populace to pay their half shekel to the Temple's coffers. This money was then used to purchase animals for the communal Temple offerings.

The first offerings purchased with the newly collected money were for Passover. This raises an obvious question. Passover begins six weeks later! Why was the collection done so far in advance? The Talmud provides an enigmatic answer to this question:

It was known and revealed before the One who said 'Let the world exist!' that one day Haman would pay out silver coins for the right to destroy the Jews (cf. Esther 3:9). Therefore, G-d preceded our shekels to his shekels."

Talmud, Megillah 13b

The Talmud is saying that our shekels are collected before Purim in order to protect us from the shekels of Haman. How

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does that work? To understand this difficult passage of Talmud, we need to learn a little more about the nature of shekels.²

II

The Midrash teaches that when G-d told Moshe to create the shekel coin, Moshe had difficulty understanding what it was. G-d showed Moshe the image of a shekel made of fire, and then Moshe understood.³

What is the meaning of this? If G-d wanted to show Moshe an image of a shekel, why did He choose to use fire? Fire has no distinct form. It would have made more sense to simply draw a picture in the sand. Moreover, fire melts and disfigures objects. A coin's value is dependent on its form and a fire would very well ruin it. So why would G-d illustrate the shekel with a coin of fire – a physical impossibility?

The Talmud (Baba Kama 97b) describes an early coin minted by none other than Abraham. Abraham minted coins with an image of an old man and an old woman on one side and an image of a young man and a young woman on the other side. Why would Abraham create his own currency? In antiquity, every dynastic ruler minted coins with their likeness embossed on the face. Abraham, a leader of renown in his own generation, printed his own, personal money. The image on his coin represented the miracle of Abraham and Sarah regaining their youthful vitality to enable the birth of Isaac. Why was it this image that Abraham chose to present to the world?

In Hebrew, the word for coin is “Matbei’ah.” The Hebrew root of the word, “Tevah,” means “nature.” What connection does a coin have with nature?

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Although G-d created and sustains the laws of nature, the great irony is that nature seems to run quite predictably and autonomously, free of any apparent Divine intervention. Nothing is more stable and unchanging than the laws of nature. When people think of Divine providence, however, they typically think of “miracles,” which are, by definition, events which *break* natural law.

Coins, like nature itself, create an impression of consistency and permanence. This is the reason why governments are so eager to mint unique coins of their own. Coins help establish a sense of permanence for a nation. Abraham’s coin, however, introduced a radically different message. The imagery on his coin shows that nature is not necessarily as consistent as you think. Natural law is in G-d’s hands and if He so chooses, He can make the old young again. Abraham’s coin tells the world that there is something beyond nature; there is a G-d.

When Moshe told G-d that he did not understand the shekel, he did not mean that he lacked a visual aid. Moshe was troubled by the concept. The verse states that the mitzvah of paying a half-shekel provides atonement for the Jewish soul (cf. Exodus 30:12). Moshe did not understand how a coin could do such a thing. So G-d showed him a shekel of fire. Silver and fire are incompatible, but therein lies the secret of the Shekel.

This head-tax was actually the method by which the nation became one community. Yes, the half shekels filled the Temple’s coffers and provided a census of the population. But it did something else more important than that. By contributing an equal portion to the census collection, everyone became a shareholder of the communal offerings. The coins facilitated the merging of a group of individuals into one great community. This is the idea of a coin of fire. Fire has a wonderful ability to melt, meld and unify disparate objects into one whole. With this vision, G-d was teaching Moses how to unite the Jews – have

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everyone contribute to a holy communal project. When we do that right, we achieve atonement for our souls.

III

In his attempt to justify the genocide of the Jews, Haman says the following to King Achashveirosh:

There is this nation that is scattered and dispersed among the peoples of all of the provinces of your Kingdom...

Esther 3:8

What is the significance of this statement? Why would the King of Persia and Media care if the Jews were spread out? Moreover, all verses in scripture are expressions of divine inspiration and must therefore contain some kernel of truth. What is the inner meaning of this statement?

Haman was hitting on a deep truth here and we would do well to listen to his words. When Haman says that the Jews are spread out, he is not just speaking geographically, he is speaking communally. A lack of cohesion and unity does indeed weaken the Jewish nation.⁴ The seriousness of this issue can be seen by the response of Esther and Mordechai. Rather than attempt to disprove Haman's statement, they gather the nation together for three days of fasting and prayer (4:16). Their solution to Haman's challenge was to unify the Jews.

The story of Purim took place in the month of Adar. As mentioned earlier, a proclamation went out on the first day of Adar reminding everyone to pay the half-shekel tax. The Talmud states that this was done well in advance of when the money was needed because G-d wants us to give our coins

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before Haman presents his. How does this work? It's not the monetary value of the coin; it's the power of the coin to create community. We use these coins to turn ourselves into a collective. This is why every individual gives a *half* shekel. Each person must be keenly aware that on his own, he is incomplete. By unifying ourselves in this way at the beginning of Adar, we undermine Haman's accusations with confidence.

The festive mitzvot of Purim are all designed to establish a sense of community. We give gifts to each other, we eat a festive meal together and we hear the Megillah together. Each tradition points to the same reality. This is the time of year for us each to contribute our own half-shekel, however we can. If the Jewish people are to be strong and survive, we must stand together as one nation unified by the mitzvot of communal service.

¹ The standard denomination of currency found in the Bible is the silver Shekel. A "Shekel" is really a measure of weight equal to approximately ten grams. This same denomination was used throughout the Temple era. The name "Shekel" has been revived in our day as the official currency of the modern state of Israel.

² This essay was inspired by a talk delivered by R. Moshe Shapiro of Jerusalem.

³ Midrash Rabba, Numbers 12:3

⁴ The medieval commentary of Tosefot notes that the 10,000 silver talents of Haman is equivalent to the 300,000 silver shekels collected by Moses in the desert for the Tabernacle. Here too we see how Haman was attempting to counteract the essential unity of the Jewish people. Indeed, the Talmud states that Haman was a master slanderer (Megillah 13b).

Jews in Exile?

G-d Goes Incognito!

Rabbi Yaacov Benzaquen

In Psalm 29, King David compares Queen Esther to the morning dawn. That is very poetic, but what does it mean? The Talmud explains that just as dawn is the end of the night, so too the story of Esther is the end of all miracles.¹

The Talmud is saying that the events of Purim mark the end of the miraculous biblical period of old and the beginning of the modern natural order.² This is more than just a historical turning point. As we shall see, the events of Purim transitioned the nation into a new kind of relationship with G-d.

II

The Talmud (Chullin 139b) asks an interesting question. “Where does the Torah allude to Esther?” The Talmud wants to find a biblical verse that prophetically foreshadows the story of Purim and it finds it here:

I will utterly hide (הסתיר אסתיר) My face from them.

Deuteronomy 31:18

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The Hebrew root “סתר” means “hidden” and this same word also serves as the name of our hero, Queen Esther (אסתר). The Talmud therefore states that this verse alludes to the Purim story.

Despite the etymological commonality, this verse seems to be a poor choice. Let us read it in its full context:

G-d said to Moshe: “When you go and lie with your ancestors, this nation shall rise up and stray after the alien gods of the land into which they are coming. They will thus abandon Me and violate the covenant that I have made with them. I will then display anger at them and abandon them. I will hide My face from them and they will be [their enemies’] prey.

Beset by many evils and troubles, they will say ‘it is because my G-d is no longer with me that these evils have befallen us.’

On that day, I will utterly hide My face because of all the evil that they have done in turning to alien gods.”

Deuteronomy 31:16-19

In brief: When the Jews are faithful to G-d, His guiding hand will be readily apparent in our lives. But if we betray Him, He will go into hiding, so to speak, and exile us from our land.

Why did the Talmud link Esther’s name to this passage? What is it about Esther that warrants a connection to such depressing verses?

III

Not all miracles are created equal. The transformation of the Nile’s water to blood, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, the crumbling of the walls of Jericho, these and many other

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supernatural events are recorded in Scriptures. This type of miracle underscores a foundational principle of Judaism – the Creator remains intimately involved in His creation. Although G-d set up the world to function according to natural law, He occasionally violates these laws to demonstrate that the universe is subject to His rule. This type of miracle is aptly named a *nes galuy*, i.e. an obvious miracle.

There is another type of miracle. A *nes nistar*, a “hidden” miracle, is a miracle in which G-d intervenes and alters the natural course without noticeably overriding natural law. *Nes nistar* is probably best translated as “Divine Providence.” Examples of *nes nistar* are, by definition, not easily identified, and they are certainly impossible to prove. Despite the very different perception from our perspective, the truth is that a *nes nistar* is no less miraculous than a *nes galuy*.

In biblical times, our nation witnessed many supernatural events. G-d’s interaction with the world was readily apparent and His hand could be seen guiding national events. The events recorded in the book of Esther, however, marked a change.

IV

In a Hollywood version of Megillat Esther, there need not be any special effects. Nowhere do we see G-d intervening and altering the natural course of events. No one in the story even receives a prophetic message. G-d is in hiding. So what is so special about this story? Where is the miracle that we are commemorating so festively on the holiday of Purim?

There is no miraculous moment in the Megillah. It seems to be quite an ordinary story of love, power, corruption and jealousy. But what catches our attention is the sequence of

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events. Seemingly insignificant events early in the story become very significant later on. The structure of the story is extraordinary.

The Megillah is thus only appreciated when viewed in its entirety. From Vashti's defiance of Achashveirosh and her untimely death to Esther's appointment as the new queen. From Haman's rise to power and Mordechai's refusal to honor him to Mordechai's discovery of a plot to kill the king. From the royal decree to annihilate the Jews to King Achashveirosh's discovery, on a sleepless night, that Mordechai was never rewarded for saving his life. From Haman's unintended suggestion that Mordechai be publicly honored to the rise of Esther and the fall of Haman. In the end, Haman is hanged and Mordechai is appointed his successor. The decree is overturned, the anti-Semites are defeated and the Jews of the Persian Empire live happily ever after.

As the story gradually unfolds, we come to recognize G-d's providence intervening at critical junctures and guiding events to their desired conclusion. Taken as a whole, it is quite miraculous. It is the prototypical *nes nistar*, a "hidden" miracle of Divine Providence.

On Purim we have a mitzvah to read Megillat Esther. The rules of the Megillah reading are quite stringent. This reading is done with great meticulousness, even more than is required for a Torah reading. If a word or letter of the Megillah is omitted by the reader or unheard by the congregation, the reading is rendered invalid and must be repeated.³ The message of this tradition is clear. Missing even the minutest detail detracts from the full picture. And without the full picture there can be no appreciation of the miracle.

This also explains why the sages felt a need to emphasize that the verses of the Megillah must be read in their correct order. The Halacha rules that if the Megillah is read out of order

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the reading is invalid.⁴ The miracle of Purim is the Megillah's extraordinary sequence of events. Change the order and the miracle vanishes.

V

In Megillat Esther, G-d is invisible; His name does not even appear in the story. But don't be fooled. G-d is present; He's just in hiding. If we read innovatively, searching for G-d carefully, we might just find Him. According to the Midrash,⁵ whenever the Megillah says "King Achashveirosh" it is referring to the human king Achashveirosh, but when the Megillah says "King" without specifying which king, it actually refers to the King of Kings who is manifesting His divine will through the mortal Achashveirosh.

Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi⁶ discovered some marvelous allusions to G-d in the Megillah, in the most interesting of places.

When Esther invites the King and Haman to a wine party, she says **יָבוֹא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן הַיּוֹם** – "*the king and Haman should come today* to the feast I have prepared for them" (Esther 5:4). Haman believes he has achieved his dream and reached the highest echelon of power and influence. Who else is invited by the queen to a private party with the King? Little does he know that the first letter of each word in this phrase spell the name of G-d! (**Y**avo **H**aMelech **V**eHaman **H**ayom.)

Another example: When Esther tells the king that Haman is out to murder her and her people, the King is enraged. Haman quickly realizes **כִּי בְרָתָהּ אֵלַי הָרָעָה** – "*that evil has been determined against him* by the king" (Esther 7:7). This is the moment of Haman's fall from power. The end letters of this phrase contain the name of G-d. (**kY** chal'ta**H** eila**V** hara'a**H**.)

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The message is clear. G-d was behind the rise of Haman to power and G-d orchestrated his downfall. G-d was present all along.

VI

Although Esther is the hero of our story, risking her life, charming the king and indicting Haman, the truth is that the Jewish People would have been saved without her. Esther was privileged to be the one through whom the redemption came, but the fate of the nation was never really in her hands. Mordechai knew this and he made sure that Esther knew it too:

Mordechai said to Esther, “Do not imagine that you will be spared in the King’s palace anymore than the rest of the Jews. For if you persist in keeping silent at a time like this, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from some other place, while you and your father’s house will perish. Who knows whether it was just for a time like this that you attained the royal position!”

She replied to Mordechai, “Go, assemble all the Jews that are to be found in Shushan, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, and I, with my maids, will fast too. Then I will go into the King though it’s unlawful; and if I perish, I perish!”

Mordechai left and did exactly as Esther had commanded him.

Esther 4:13-16

Regardless of whether Esther chose to risk her life and appear before the king, the Jewish people would be saved. G-d may no longer perform open miracles, but He has no shortage of means to deliver His people from the hands of their oppressors. G-d always has an alternative plan.

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This is the message of the Megillah: Our national survival is nothing short of a miracle.

VII

The inexplicable survival of the Jewish people and their Torah through millennia of exile, expulsion and persecution is the ultimate example of a *nes nistar*, a “hidden” miracle. Not supernatural, but miraculous nonetheless.

If statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of stardust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly, the Jew ought hardly to be heard of, but he is heard of, has always been heard of... He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and had done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it.

The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed; and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other people have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?"

Mark Twain, Harper's Magazine, 1899

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Let us not misunderstand our story. The fate of the Jewish People is never dependent on the decisions, or even the heroics, of an individual. Their fate is always in G-d's hands. The Jews of the Persian Empire had repented from their wrongdoings and had pleaded to G-d to save them from Haman's decree. That is what saved them.

The Torah states clearly that the Jewish People will never be annihilated. Their numbers may be diminished for a while, they may be decimated and subject to great sufferings, yet they will ultimately survive and thrive. This is the divine promise that we live by.

Thus, even when they are in their enemies' land, I will not grow so disgusted with them nor so tired of them that I would destroy them and break My covenant with them, since I am G-d their Lord. I will remember the covenant with their original ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations, so as to be their G-d.

Leviticus 26: 44-45

This passage describes the man/G-d relationship when the Jews are in exile, "in their enemies' land," and it stands in testament of G-d's love for us. In the darkest of times, when we lose faith and feel alone, G-d is still with us. He may go into "hiding," and we may not recognize His presence, but from His hiding place, He watches over us.⁷ As King Solomon described it, G-d "supervises from the windows and peeks through the cracks."⁸ Just because we don't see Him does not mean that He is not there. G-d is always nearby, watching over His people from between the cracks.

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¹ Yoma 29a

² Although it is certainly not the last miracle in Jewish history – Chanukah, for example, took place over two centuries later – the story of Esther is the last miracle recorded in Tanach, the twenty-four books of Scripture. The story of Esther is thus the last biblical miracle.

³ Mishnah Berurah O.C. 690:5

⁴ Shulchan Aruch O.C. 690:6

⁵ Midrash Aba Gurion, Esther, quoting R. Yodan and R. Levi.

⁶ R. Eliezer Ashkenazi (1512-1585) held rabbinic positions in Egypt, Cyprus and Poland. His lengthy analysis of Megillat Esther is entitled “Yosef Lekach.”

⁷ See Seforno to Deuteronomy 31:18 who explains that the feeling of abandonment and the statement that “G-d is no longer with me” is nothing more than a false perception.

⁸ Song of Songs 2:9

Selfishness vs. Community in the Book of Esther

Rabbi Avromi Apt

Purim is a very joyous time. We celebrate by wearing costumes and delivering gifts to our friends. The Megillah tells us that the Jews of that time celebrated with “days of feasting and happiness, sending food to one another and gifts to the poor” (Esther 9:22). The traditional observances of Purim are designed to ensure that every Jew takes part in the festivities, creating a community-wide celebration.

Why is this holiday different than every other holiday? Why the extra focus on community?

It stands to reason that the explanation of our Purim observances will be found in the Purim story, in Megillat Esther itself. A review is in order. To simplify matters, we will break down the Megillah into three basic sections:

- A description of King Achashveirosh’s lavish parties.
- Haman's rise to power and his collaboration with the king to destroy the Jews.
- Queen Esther’s success in reversing the decree and saving the Jewish people.

Let’s take a closer look at each of these three parts.

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II

The story begins with the lavish parties of the Persian king Achashveirosh. First he throws a party for all the officers of his kingdom. This extravagant party lasted for *one hundred and eighty days* (Esther 1:4). Then he throws a seven-day party for all the inhabitants of the capital, Shushan (1:5). Judging by the Megillah's report, the opulence and extravagance of these parties were of historic proportions. However, the Megillah provides no explanation for why the king is making these parties.

It seems that the king is trying to consolidate his power by appeasing his officers and the citizens of his capital. Did something happen to be a cause for discontent?

Another question. The story line moves from Achashveirosh's parties to the rise of the villain Haman. This leads the Talmud to conclude that the Jews were punished with Haman for the sin of attending the king's party.¹ Why? What could be so bad about attending a party?

The Megillah states that Achashveirosh made these parties "when he was sitting on his throne in Shushan, the capital" (1:2). What is the significance of his throne and its being in the capital city? Where else would it be? The Midrash sees in this verse a reference to a fascinating background story.

King Solomon had a very special throne. It was fashioned of ivory and covered with gold. It was set with rubies, sapphires, emeralds and other precious stones. It was a wonder of the ancient world, and Achashveirosh, in his arrogance, wanted one just like it.²

Achashveirosh hired artisans in Shushan to replicate the throne of King Solomon and it took them three years to do it. When the throne was complete, Achashveirosh attempted to

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move it to the capital, but it was too heavy. Rather than forgo the project, he moved the capital city to the town of Shushan. Hence, the story of the Megillah begins with these words:

In those days, when King Achashveirosh sat on his royal throne which was in Shushan the capital, in the third year of his kingdom, he made a party.

Esther 1:2

Moving a capital is an enormous undertaking, one that is highly inconvenient for government workers. This is why Achashveirosh made them a party. And to solidify the allegiance of the citizens of Shushan his new capital, he made them a party too.

What was the modus operandi of the party? Eat and drink to your heart's content. There were no rules or limitations – just uninhibited indulgence (1:8). Like his need to satisfy his own vanity, Achashveirosh intended to satisfy everyone's desires.

Mordechai, the great sage and spiritual guide, warned the Jews against going to the king's party.³ He maintained that attending an uninhibited party dedicated to celebrating the king's vanity was antithetical to Jewish values. Self-centered and indulgent behavior corrodes selflessness and develops self-centeredness. That is bad enough, but it leads to an even worse consequence. Self-centeredness undermines the sense of communal responsibility that is so critical to the survival of the Jewish community in the Diaspora. This is what Mordechai was worried about.

Rabbi Matisyahu Solomon⁴ points out that it was very appropriate for Mordechai to bear this message to the Jews. The Megillah identifies Mordechai as both an "Ish Yehudi," a man from Judah (2:5) and an "Ish Yemini," a man from Benjamin (ibid). Historically, there was much tension between these two tribes.⁵ Mordechai, however, was a descendant of both of them.⁶

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He personified the possibility that people can forget their differences and work together. As a living model of a Jewish community, he knew well the dangers that self-centeredness posed. He warned the people not to go, but they did not heed his warnings.

III

The Jews go to the party. What happens next? Haman rises to power and decides to annihilate the Jews. He approaches King Achashveirosh and presents his plan with the following introduction:

There is a nation that is scattered and dispersed throughout your kingdom.

Esther 3:8

What is the relevance of this piece of information? Haman wanted to allay the king's fears of an uprising. The Jews were so fragmented that there is no fear of them banding together and forming militias to protect themselves. Was Haman telling the truth? The Talmud says that indeed he was.⁷ After attending the party, it seems that the Jewish society had crumbled, just as Mordechai had foretold.

The king agrees to the genocide, the date is set for the 13th of Adar (3:13), and the word is sent out across the kingdom. The reaction of the people is described by the Megillah with this verse:

The city of Shushan was distressed.

Esther 3:15

The city of Shushan was inhabited by Jews and non-Jews. Presumably, only the Jews of Shushan were distressed. What

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does this verse mean? It seems that this was an important turning point in the story. As soon as all the Jews were doomed by royal decree for annihilation, their divisiveness vanished. Selfish no more, they are now “the city of Shushan.” Only the Jews were united as a community; their gentile neighbors were not.

This is not a uniquely Jewish experience. It is a natural phenomenon that, when challenged by an external threat, people, even animals, can forget their differences and band together. But for Jews, feelings of national identification and unity have religious significance.

The eternal mission of the Jewish nation is to be a light and an inspiration to humanity. “The nations will walk by your light” (Isaiah 60:3). This light is the wisdom and beauty of the Jewish lifestyle, founded in the Torah. G-d promised that Jews and Judaism will live on forever.⁸ However, this was a collective guarantee. To be protected by it and fulfill our eternal mission, we need unity.

IV

Mordechai sends a message to Queen Esther, directing her to devise a plan to save the Jews. He tells her to speak to the king on behalf of her people. She counters that entering the king’s chamber without a summons is suicidal. Mordechai responds, “Don’t be concerned with yourself as an individual” (4:13). Selfishness is what got us in this mess to start with!

Mordechai continues:

“If you remain silent at this time, deliverance will come to the Jews from some other place and you and your father’s house will perish.”

Esther 4:14

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The Jewish nation is eternal; G-d has guaranteed our survival. You can be part of the salvation through this act of devotion to your people, or you can be left out of the process – and if you opt out, you will be destroyed!

Mordechai was making an extraordinary point: The Jewish people does not need Esther; Esther needs the Jewish people. The individual's only hope for survival is to throw their fate in with the community.

Esther requests that all the Jews of Shushan come together and fast on her behalf for three days along with her. Only then would she be willing to approach the king:

Go assemble all the Jews that are to be found in Shushan and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, and I, with my maids, will fast too. Thus I will come to the king though it is against the law. If I perish, I perish.

Esther 4:16

Esther's intent here is not hard to grasp. Aware of the truth of Haman's indictment that the Jews are "scattered and dispersed," Esther directed them to assemble and unite. The fasting addressed a different problem. In order to undo the effects of their participation in Achashveirosh's party, the Jews had to fast. Abstaining from the pleasure of eating for the benefit of someone else would be the polar opposite of their self-indulgent behavior at the party. It thus served to cure their souls and transform them back into empathetic people. With national unity and Jewish caring renewed, Esther felt confident enough to approach the king. As we all know, she succeeded in eliminating Haman and overturning the decree.

In the end, King Achashveirosh grants the Jews the right to defend themselves against their enemies (8:10-11). When the gentiles become aware that the Jews will group together in self-

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defense, they abandon their plans of anti-Semitic violence (9:2). Jewish unity scares them. As the story closes the Megillah states, “The city of Shushan was cheerful and glad” (8:15). Once again, the Jews are referred to as “the city of Shushan.” Apparently, even after the external threat was neutralized, the Jews remained united. They had achieved the ultimate Jewish value of “Achdut,” communal “oneness.” This was the strength of our people at that time.

Purim is a celebration of community. We wear costumes to downplay our individuality, reminding ourselves that as individuals we could never survive. We rejoice and celebrate together with our brothers and sisters, throwing parties that are not self-indulgent rather all-inclusive. Finally, we distribute gifts of food to Jewish friends and charity to the Jewish poor.⁹ These practices all demonstrate the continued unity of our people, validating faith in a bright Jewish future.

¹ Talmud, Megillah 12a

² Midrash Rabba, Esther 1:12. After the Jews were exiled, all attempts to sit on King Solomon’s throne failed. A mechanical security feature of the throne knocked them off. (Midrash ad loc.)

³ Midrash Rabba, Esther 7:13

⁴ Matnat Chaim, pg. 123. R. Solomon is Mashgiach, spiritual mentor, at Beit Midrash Gavoha in Lakewood, N.J.

⁵ Cf. Judges chap. 19-20; Kings I 12:19. This tension most likely has its source in the struggle between Rachel and Leah, the mothers of Judah and Benjamin.

⁶ The Talmud (Megillah 12b) explains that Mordechai’s father was from the tribe of Benjamin and his mother was from the tribe of Judah.

⁷ Talmud, Megillah 13b

⁸ Cf. Deuteronomy 31:21

⁹ “True happiness can only be achieved by raising the spirits of the poor and the downtrodden.” (Maimonides, Laws of Megillah 2:17)

Celebrating Tragedy with Wine

Rabbi Yisroel Gordon

There is a popular misconception about Megillat Esther. People tend to think of it as an entertaining story with a “happily ever after” ending. After all, the festive holiday of Purim was instituted to celebrate these events. Jewish children from time immemorial have dressed up like Queen Esther, Mordechai, Achashveirosh and Haman and reenacted the Megillah. But the truth of the matter is, the story is anything but happy. Scenes deemed inappropriate for young audiences are censored out of the school plays and many people get a sanitized picture of the events. Facing the truth is often disturbing, but there is no denying that Megillat Esther is a tragedy.

Esther had no interest in beauty contests and she certainly had no interest in living with the vile anti-Semite Achashveirosh. No doubt the title “Queen” has contributed to the misconceptions about Esther’s true role in the palace. Against her will she was taken into a loveless intermarriage.¹ That is, if we could call it a marriage – slavery would be a more accurate description. Their relationship was not exactly a model

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of marital bliss. Esther refused to share her family history² and her husband maintained a well-stocked harem.³ She could not so much as see Achashveirosh without an official invitation – and such invitations were rare.⁴ For the crime of entering his room uninvited Esther could expect the death penalty, no different than a commoner.⁵ In short, “Queen” Esther was living a nightmare.

On Purim we celebrate. We celebrate Esther’s transformation from the king’s slave-girl into the power behind the throne. We admire her brilliant political machinations and we cheer as she single-handedly foils Haman’s perfectly planned genocide. But yet, Esther’s plight breaks our hearts. Even as the story ends, Esther remains imprisoned in the palace; she will never marry a nice Jewish boy. Yes, the nation was saved, but shouldn’t the tragedy of Esther’s personal life put a damper on our holiday celebrations? Are our Purim parties appropriate in the face of the real story?

There is another problem with our Purim celebrations, a more basic problem of profound theological import. Judaism is strictly monotheistic; there is but one G-d Almighty and that is it. Belief in autonomous forces operating independently of G-d is heretical, as is a belief in randomness or chaos. The one G-d of Israel controls all.

Our question is simple: Why do we thank G-d on Purim for a victory over our enemies if G-d was the one who sent them after us in the first place?!⁶

The Purim revelry provides no escape; on the contrary, it forces us to confront the great riddles of our faith. And if Purim raises questions, it must also provide answers. Our inquiry will begin with the great villain of the story, Haman. Haman was the first to attempt a genocide of the Jews; he was nothing less than a Persian Hitler. If we are to understand evil, we would do well to research his roots. Haman was a descendant of Aggag,⁷ the

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Amalekite chieftain.⁸ Aggag traced his line to the monstrous Amalek, grandson of Esav.⁹ The search for answers thus takes us all the way back to the great confrontation of those two twin brothers, Yaakov and Esav.

II

Circa 1560BCE

It had been many long years since Yaakov had fled Esav's wrath, but now it was the night before the showdown. Tomorrow morning Yaakov will face his mortal enemy, his brother Esav. Esav is armed and dangerous, supported by four hundred mercenaries, while Yaakov is vulnerable, traveling with women and children. Yaakov puts his faith in G-d and prepares for the worst.

That night, Yaakov gets no sleep. A demonic angel attacks and Yaakov must fight for his life. This angel is no underling. It is the mighty archangel of Esav: Evil incarnate.¹⁰ After a night of wrestling, Yaakov finally pins him down and asks the least expected of questions:

“What is your name?”

Instead of answering the question, the angel responds elusively:

“Why is this one asking my name?” (cf. Bereishit 32:25-30)

What is going on here? Why does Yaakov care what the angel's name is? And why won't the angel give a straight answer? What is the meaning of this strange dialogue?

In the Torah, names are never arbitrary labels. Rather, they are one-word definitions that describe the essence of the thing.¹¹ There is a very simple reason for this: G-d brought all things

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into existence through speech. “And G-d *said*, ‘Let there be light...’” A biblical Hebrew name is the word that G-d used to create the thing and therefore must contain its complete spiritual genome.

Now, angels are G-d’s army of spiritual robots, beings designed and created for specialized missions. Angels have no free will and no personal identity other than the one function of fulfilling their mission; there is simply nothing else to them.¹² When Yaakov asks the angel his name, what he is really asking for is an explanation. What are you made of? Why did you attack me? And above all, how could I have possibly won the fight?

An angel is no more and no less than an agent of G-d, and when G-d takes up a fight, He always uses sufficient firepower. There is just no such thing as an angel failing to accomplish its mission. So Yaakov is baffled not only by the divine mugging, but also by his own victory. “What is your name,” he asks. “What is your mission? G-d sent you to kill me, and you failed?!”

The angel did not evade the question; he was shocked by it. “Why is this one asking my name?” Yaakov, you don’t understand my mission? You, of all people, should know it well. My mission was to be defeated by you.

Here Yaakov learns the secret of evil. The national mission of the Jewish nation is “Tikkun Olam,” repairing the world. This means that G-d created an imperfect world and the possibility of evil in order to privilege us with the job of fixing the world by defeating evil. This is why evil exists. At the very moment that the angel of evil is defeated, his mission is accomplished. That is its function and name.¹³

As soon as Yaakov defeats the angel, it wants to go home – but Yaakov won’t let go. The angel cries out, “Let me leave!” (ibid 32:27). The Midrash explains that it was time now for the

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angel to return to heaven and sing the praises of G-d.¹⁴ Why now? The angel is in the mood for singing after losing a nightlong wrestling match? Yes. When Esav's angel is defeated, it wants to report its success and celebrate!

This angel's joyous defeatism is the subconscious attitude of all evil. Here's an example from the Purim story:

In the Megillah, as in a Torah scroll, not all verses are written the same way. Most of the time verses appear in ordinary columns, but sometimes they are arranged differently, in a format called a "Shira," a song. The "Song by the Sea" (Exodus 15:1-19) and the song of Ha'azinu (Deuteronomy 32:1-43) are well known biblical examples. Less well known is the "song" found in Megillat Esther.

Toward the end of the story, after Haman's plot is foiled, the king grants the Jews free reign to destroy their enemies.

In Shushan the capital the Jews slew and destroyed five hundred men and Parshandata, and Dalfon, and Aspata, and Porata, and Adalya and Aridata, and Parmashta, and Arisay, and Ariday, and Vayzata, the ten sons of Haman the Hammedata, the enemy of the Jews... the ten sons of Haman were hanged.

Esther 9:6-10,14

The Talmud (Megillah 16b) states that these ten names are to be written in the Megillah in form of a "song," and this is required by Halacha in no uncertain terms: "If it is not written this way, the Megillah is not kosher" (Shulchan Aruch O.C. 691:3).¹⁵

What is the meaning of this? Why must the ten hanging sons of Haman be written as a song?

The answer should be obvious. As the Amalekite sons of Haman hanged, they sang. They sang that wonderful song first

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composed by their angelic counterpart so many years earlier when it was defeated by Yaakov. Now, in their defeat, they too celebrate the fulfillment of their mission with song.

III

It seems that our perception of evil is skewed. Evil isn't really all that evil after all; it's just doing its job, happily presenting itself to be destroyed by us. On a deeper level, evil is actually quite good. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto, the great 18th century Italian Kabbalist, utilized an analogy to explain this seemingly bizarre concept:

“Whatever G-d does is for the eventual good” (Talmud, Berachot 60b). That is, even pain and suffering which appear evil are in fact truly good. This is comparable to a doctor who makes an incision or amputates a limb in order to heal a patient and save a life. Even though the act appears cruel, in reality it is compassionate and for the patient's own good. The operation does not damage the patient's relationship with the doctor; on the contrary, [after the operation] the patient will be even more devoted to him. In the same way, when man considers that all that G-d does to him, bodily or financially, is for his own good – even though he cannot perceive nor comprehend how it is good, but good it is – his love for G-d will not be diminished by any pain or suffering; on the contrary, it will be strengthened!

Path of the Just, chap. 19

It would be a mistake to judge evil by its cover. Monotheism forces us to acknowledge that behind the mask of evil lies an invisible, divine goodness.¹⁶ A manifestation of

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“evil” in the world might be an opportunity for us to engage in Tikkun Olam or it might be G-d taking some painful Tikkun Olam into His own hands. Either way, nothing is random and nothing is meaningless.

I am G-d, and there is none else.

I form light and create darkness;

I make peace and create evil.

I, G-d, do all these things.

Isaiah 45:6-7

If G-d creates evil and G-d is good,¹⁷ evil must be good. To our ears, such statements sound strange, foolish, even heartless, but that is because evil *is* evil from our perspective. All year long, that is. On Purim, our perspective must change.

IV

On Purim we have a mitzvah without parallel. It is not simply to drink a cup of wine – that is standard for a Jewish holiday. Purim is different. On Purim there is a mitzvah to drink wine until you “don’t know the difference between Haman is cursed and Mordechai is blessed.”¹⁸ That is a pretty advanced state of inebriation.

Note that the Halacha does not say to get drunk in order to allow for uninhibited merriment. The stated intent is to drink until we can’t tell the difference between the Haman the villain and Mordechai the hero. In other words, the goal is to lose our ability to distinguish between good and evil. What a strange mitzvah! Drink until you reach the exalted state of relativism?! What kind of mitzvah is that?

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This tradition is hitting on a deeper reality. The letters of the Hebrew alphabet are more than just letters; they are numbers too. When the numerical value of a word's letters are added up, the total is considered to be mystically linked to the word's inner meaning. This value is called the word's "Gematria." It follows that two words of equal numeric value, i.e. two words with the same Gematria, are, on some deep level, synonymous. The definitions of equivalent words must share a common denominator. Commentators have long pointed out the extraordinary fact that the Hebrew words "Haman is cursed" and "Mordechai is blessed" share the same Gematria.¹⁹ That is, they are numerically equivalent and are therefore synonymous on some level. But they are exact opposites! What does cursing the wicked have to do with blessing the righteous?

There is a powerful message contained in this strange mitzvah, a message that is easily misunderstood but yet central to our faith.

From our human perspective, there is good and there is also evil. We are enjoined by G-d to recognize this reality and to fight the forces of evil. By doing so, we hope to achieve "Tikkun Olam," the ultimate fixing of the world. However, there is a higher reality. From G-d's omniscient perspective, evil doesn't really exist. Everything that happens in this world happens for a reason, even if our limited mortal minds cannot fathom what that reason might be. G-d is in control and He knows what He is doing. If we could see through the veil of circumstance, coincidence and chaos, if we had an unobstructed view of the past, the future and the afterlife, we would recognize that all situations are, in the end, expressions of G-d's infinite love. This is the message of the story of Esther, and achieving this heightened awareness is the goal of the day.

Truth be told, if we fail to achieve this perspective, the entire holiday of Purim falls flat. If we cannot accept that there

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is a purpose to Haman's existence, why celebrate? After all, it was G-d who sent him after us in the first place!

Such a perspective is definitely not normative. It involves a denial of the plain appearances of our reality. This is why we drink. Once a year we drink and release ourselves from the constraints of human perception and logic. Only from this altered state can we recognize that both Haman and Mordechai are really one and the same, for both have their source in the One Almighty G-d. We drink until we don't know anymore which one of them should receive our blessings.²⁰ After all, if not for Haman, there would be no Purim!

In the aforementioned parable of Luzzatto, evil was compared to a surgical amputation. Just as the patient does not resent the doctor, so too man should not resent G-d. However, this analogy does not fully resolve the problem. Even if we can bring ourselves to accept this idea on an intellectual level, the operation remains excruciatingly painful. Maybe evil does have a purpose, but it still hurts. Accepting the divine prognosis that an "operation" is necessary – even if I don't understand why – does not necessarily alleviate the stresses that pain can put on man's relationship with G-d. So on Purim we drink. We drink and we numb the pain, and then all is good.

V

This is the Purim concept of "ונהפוך הוא," "it was turned upside-down" (Esther 9:1). When evil is seen as good everything is indeed upside-down. This idea is further illustrated by an enigmatic, mystical teaching of the Ari z"l.²¹ He taught that the Talmudic name for Yom Kippur, Yom HaKippurim, should be translated thus: "A day which is like Purim." Yom Kippur is a day like Purim? What does that mean?

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If any two days on the Jewish calendar are polar opposites, it is Yom Kippur and Purim!

What do we do on Yom Kippur? We do Teshuvah, we repent. What happens when we repent? Our sins are atoned, cleansed and erased from the record book. This is true, but it is an incomplete answer. The Talmud states that when a person repents out of love for G-d, sins are not only forgiven, they are turned into merits! (Yoma 86b). A sin that serves as a wake-up call and drives man to fix his relationship with G-d is retroactively transformed into something positive. On Yom Kippur, reality is turned upside-down and evil becomes good! It is indeed a day like Purim.²²

The perspective of Purim is not new. In fact, once upon a time, it was normative.

In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve were warned not to eat the fruit of the “tree of knowledge of good and evil.” They ate it and were changed.

The eyes of both of them opened and they realized that they were naked. They sewed together fig leaves fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

Genesis 3:7

What happened here?

Before they ate the fruit, Adam and Eve existed on a higher plane. From their elevated perspective, they could clearly see how all things come from G-d and were thus unable to distinguish between good and evil. But when they ate the fruit of *knowledge of good and evil*, their perception changed. They saw good on the one hand and evil on the other. Walking around naked just didn't seem right anymore.

The Talmud (Chulin 139b) states that Haman (המגן) is alluded to in the Torah by this verse:

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Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat from the tree (הַמֵּץ הָעֵץ) which you were commanded not to eat from?

Genesis 3:11

What does this verse have to do with Haman? In light of what we have learned, the Talmud's meaning is understood. This verse refers to the point at which humanity acquired its perception of evil as an independent entity, the opposite of good. This is the way we perceive Haman; we label him as evil and so we should. However, at the same time we are also aware that our attitude towards Haman, like our attitude towards nakedness, is due to our having consumed the fruit of knowledge. There is a higher reality, a divine perspective, which does not distinguish between good and evil at all.

The Talmud records a tradition that the fruit of knowledge was a grape (Berachot 40a). How interesting it is that on Purim we use wine to shatter our "knowledge" of good and evil and enable a glimpse of the divine unity and inherent goodness of all things. This quest for a higher perspective also explains the custom to wear a costume. The last thing we want to do on Purim is make the mistake of judging people by their appearance. On Purim, everything and everyone is just wonderful.

Besides alcohol, there is another way to reassess our attitude towards evil: Retrospect. This is what G-d meant when he told Moshe that while the "face" of G-d may not be seen, Moshe could view G-d's "back" (Exodus 33:23). At the time that events transpire, we are unable to fathom G-d's involvement. But afterwards, in hindsight, we may well discern how everything turned out for the best.²³ Indeed, from the vantage point of the end of time, we will be able to look back on history and understand that it was G-d directing events all along.²⁴

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Megillat Esther illustrates this concept. During the story, G-d appears to be quite absent, but when it is over, we look back and see G-d. The same can be said for the plight of Esther herself. She is trapped in a relationship with Achashveirosh, a relationship that certainly appears tragic, but this strange union has a purpose. Not only was Esther able to leverage her influence to save the Jews, her marriage produced a historic figure: Darius the Second. The great Persian king who allowed the Jews to rebuild the Holy Temple in Jerusalem was a Jew, the son of Esther and Achashveirosh!²⁵ In the end, all is good.

We should remember that awareness of the hidden reality of evil does not exempt us from our obligation to fight it. Focusing on the positive side of evil is an “upside-down” attitude. As we have seen, the ultimate purpose of evil is to be defeated by us and Purim teaches this as well. At the end of Megillat Esther, the king allows the Jews to destroy their enemies. The Jews wisely take full advantage of the opportunity.

VI

After Esav’s angel was defeated by Yaakov on the spiritual plane, we would have expected the same to play out on the terrestrial battlefield. However, when Yaakov faces Esau the next morning, instead of the great battle between good and evil, they cordially part ways. Esau remains strong and well-armed and Yaakov is left vulnerable to future raids. This is strange. It seems as if the angel’s defeat did not have any lasting effect.

Apparently, Yaakov’s victory over the angel does not foreshadow the next morning, but the utopian future.²⁶ As the verse says, “They wrestled *until sunrise*.” That is, the wrestling match with evil and terror will continue throughout time, throughout exile and throughout the return journey to Israel,

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until the sunrise of Moshiach comes and history as we know it ends. Until then, we will never have true peace and we can never rest. In the meanwhile, we should learn to appreciate the existence of evil. Without it, we would lose the opportunity to fight and be bereft of the opportunity to engage in Tikkun Olam.

¹ “And Esther was *taken* to the King’s palace...” (Esther 2:8) “against her will” (Targum ad loc.); see also 2:16, “And Esther was *taken* to the King Achashveirosh...”

² Esther 2:20

³ Ibid 2:19

⁴ A month could go by in which the king did not care to see her at all, cf. Esther 4:11.

⁵ Ibid 4:11

⁶ A full treatment of the problem of theodicy is not the intent of this short essay (nor is it within the abilities of this writer). The classic text is the biblical Book of Job, but Jewish thinkers have grappled with the issue throughout the ages. In 1733, R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto published *Da’at Tevunot*, an influential work that deals with the problem of evil from a Kabbalistic perspective. More recent works include *Faith after the Holocaust* by Eliezer Berkovits (Ktav, 1973) and *G-d and Evil: A Jewish Perspective* by David Birnbaum (Ktav 1996). On the Jewish response to tragedy, see *Out of the Whirlwind: Essays on Suffering, Mourning and the Human Condition* by Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik (Ktav, 2003) and *Making Sense of Suffering: A Jewish Approach* by Yitzchok Kirzner (Artscroll, 2002).

For the purposes of this essay, we will not distinguish here between evil perpetrated by man and the “evil” of tragic, “natural” events. The issue at hand is the existence of pain, evil and tragedy in our world, regardless of its source.

⁷ Ibid 3:1

⁸ Samuel I 15:8

⁹ Genesis 36:12

¹⁰ “A man wrestled with him” – “It was the archangel of Esav” (Midrash Rabba, Genesis 77); “A man wrestled with him – this angel is the archangel of Eisav, it is Samael” (Zohar, Vayishlach 170a); “Samael... is

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appointed over the nation of Eisav” (Zohar, Pinchas 246b); “What is Evil? Samael (Zohar, Mishpatim 115a); “Samael is the chief prosecuting angel” (Midrash Rabba, Deuteronomy 11:9). For a complete compilation of sources on Samael, see R. Reuven Margolias’ Malachei Elyon pgs. 248-270.

¹¹ An obvious example can be found in Bereishit 14:2, “Bera (ברע) the king of Sodom and Birsha (ברשע) the king of Gomorrah.” “Ra” and “Resha” are the Hebrew words for evil.

¹² Free will is a uniquely human ability; it is the meaning of our being created “in the image of G-d.” “Angels have no free will, no sin and no punishment. Any ‘sin’ or ‘punishment’ of angels (found in Talmudic or Midrashic literature) is no more than the fulfillment of a mission in order to teach a lesson to man” (Michtav M’Eliyahu vol. 2, pg. 214 based on Rabbenu Chananel to Talmud Chagigah 15a).

¹³ “The truth is, even the evil inclination itself does not want people to listen to him, as is illustrated by the parable in the Zohar, Terumah 163a” (R. Chaim Volozhiner, Ruach Chaim, intro.).

¹⁴ “[Yaakov] asked him, ‘Are you a thief or a burglar that you are afraid of the morning?’ ‘I am an angel,’ he replied. ‘From the day that I was created it has not been time for me to sing until now.’” (Talmud, Chullin 91a).

¹⁵ There is more than one formatting style for the writing of Scriptural songs; lyrical phrases can be interspaced in different ways. “All songs in Scripture are written in the form of a half brick above a whole brick and a whole brick above a half brick (cf. Shulchan Aruch Y.D. 275:3-5), except for this song [of the ten sons of Haman] and [the song of] the kings of Canaan (cf. Joshua 12:9-24) which are written in the form of a half brick above a half brick and a whole brick above a whole brick. Why [are these songs formatted differently]? [To symbolize] that there should never be a recovery from their downfall” (Talmud, Megillah 16b).

¹⁶ “Even the evil which G-d brings into the world is brought with wisdom” (Jerusalem Talmud, Yevamot 9:3). “The force of the evil inclination could have no existence at all, not even for a moment, if it didn’t draw from sanctity. At its root above at the top it is ‘in holiness’ (sic), but it comes down [into the physical realm] in a ‘condition’ of evil” (R. Chaim Volozhiner, Ruach Chaim, intro.).

¹⁷ “... ‘from good’ (מטוב) refers to G-d, as the verse states, ‘G-d is good to everyone’ (Psalms 145)” (Talmud, Menachot 53b). “טוב,” “Good,” is actually one of G-d’s names, cf. Shir HaShirim Zuta 1.

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¹⁸ Talmud Megillah 7b; Shulchan Aruch O.C. 695:2.

¹⁹ ברוך=228, מרדכי=274. 228+274=502. ארור=407, המן=95. 407+95=502. Magen Avraham (695:3) cites earlier commentators (Avudraham & Sefer HaEshkol) who explain that the mitzvah is to drink wine on Purim until one is too drunk to calculate the common Gematria of these two phrases. This is obviously a lot less drunk than one who actually confuses Mordechai with Haman. For other lenient interpretations of this mitzvah, see the sources cited by my esteemed (and sober) colleague R. Avi Lebowitz on pg. 55, note #54.

²⁰ This explains a surprising Halacha of Purim. “There are those who say that one is exempt from paying for [minor] damages caused by the Purim revelry” (Rama 695:2). There is no accountability for damage on Purim for the goal of Purim is to understand – to a minor degree, at least – that all is good.

²¹ “Ari” is an acronym for R. Yitzchak Luria of Safed (1534-1572), the preeminent exponent of Kabbalistic teachings in modern times.

²² R. Yerucham Levovitz (Da’at Chuchma U’Mussar vol. I, essay 25) explains the Ari z”l with the Midrashic teaching that even the accusing angel defends the Jews on Yom Kippur (Pirkei D’Rebbi Eliezer quoted by the Rosh to Yoma 8:24). Again, the common denominator is the revelation of the positive side of evil.

²³ Torat Moshe (R. Moshe Sofer), ad loc.

²⁴ Cf. Chofetz Chayim Al HaTorah, Parshat Vayigash

²⁵ “Darius the Second was the son of Esther, pure from his mother’s side and impure from his father’s side” (Midrash Rabba, Leviticus 13:5).

²⁶ “Everything that happened to the forefathers is a sign for their descendants” (Midrash Tanchuma, Genesis 9).

The Four Mitzvot of Purim:

A Halachic Guide

Rabbi Avi Lebowitz

It is unfortunate that the significance of Purim is so widely misunderstood. Many seem to think of it as nothing more than a “Jewish Halloween.” Instead of pumpkin pie, we eat Hamentashen. What makes Purim different? In what way is it more than just a costume party?

In a word: “Mitzvot.” Jews don't simply celebrate or commemorate; we strive to appreciate the spiritual significance of the day. We achieve this goal through the mitzvot, which imbue Purim with its unique meaning.

The purpose of this guide is to do more than simply serve as a practical reference. By way of studying the finer details of the Halacha, the elusive definitions of the law come into focus. Truly understanding the mitzvot is the best way to understand the essence of Purim itself.

There are four mitzvot unique to the holiday of Purim: Reading Megillat Esther, giving charity to the poor, giving presents of food and celebrating with a festive meal. We will present the mitzvot in this order within the body of the text,

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focusing on the “what” and the “how.” We will cite sources and explain some of the “why” in the footnotes.

I. Reading Megillat Esther

1. Both men and women¹ are equally obligated to read the Megillah from a proper scroll,² both on Purim night³ and then again by Purim day.⁴
2. The reading of the Megillah takes precedence⁵ over

¹ “Women were also included in the miracle” (Talmud, Megillah 4a). The commentaries debate whether the Talmud means that the enemy also threatened women or that that a woman (Esther) was responsible for the miracle (Tosafot).

² Shulchan Aruch 790:3. It is worth noting that a Megillah replete with mistakes may still qualify as a kosher Megillah (see Shulchan Aruch 790, 791).

³ “Night” and “Day” are Halachic terms. Halachic “night” begins when stars become visible, and “day” begins with the first ray of sunlight in the morning and continues until sunset. However, the ideal time for the daytime reading of the Megillah is after sunrise (Shulchan Aruch 787:1).

⁴ Talmud, Megillah 4a. The daytime reading is the primary mitzvah, as the Megillah itself seems to refer only to the daytime reading (Esther 9:28). Furthermore, the daytime reading compliments the other mitzvot of Purim which are all performed during the day (Tosafot). Nevertheless, the Jews prayed for G-d’s salvation at night too, so in addition to the daytime reading we also read the Megillah at night (M.B. 787:2). Some posit that the daytime reading is a scriptural obligation whereas that of night is Rabbinic in nature (Sha’arei Teshuva 787:1).

⁵ The reason the reading of the Megillah has such primacy, despite its Rabbinic status, is due to its publicizing the miracle of the Purim story. The Chanukah candles and the four cups of wine on Passover have a similar status due to their publicizing miracles. One is even required to sell “the shirt off their back” to perform these mitzvot! (Maimonides, Laws of Chanukah 4:12). The Chatam Sofer (Notes to Megillah 6b) suggests that although the particular method of publicizing the miracle is Rabbinic, the fundamental requirement to publicize a miracle is a Biblical obligation. While this explains why these mitzvot are held in such high regard, it does not justify the requirement to spend more on these mitzvot than on ordinary mitzvot of Biblical origin. See Maharam Shick (Responsa 331) who explains that

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almost every other mitzvah.⁶

3. This obligation can be fulfilled either by personally reading the Megillah⁷ or by hearing someone else read it,⁸

mitzvot which publicize miracles are classified as obligations toward others and as such they require a greater degree of financial commitment.

⁶ Talmud, Megillah 3a. Any mitzvah that can be put off until after the reading of the Megillah is postponed. Even Torah study is interrupted for the sake of the Megillah reading. Burying the dead is the exception to this rule because it is of paramount importance to honor the dead by burying the body as soon as possible. However, when faced with the situation of reading the Megillah vs. performing a Biblical commandment that cannot be done afterward, the Biblical mitzvah does take precedence over the Rabbinic mitzvah of reading the Megillah. Some authorities go so far as to say that the Megillah even takes precedence over a Biblical mitzvah that cannot be done later (M.B. 787:11).

⁷ Even if the Megillah is read alone, it is still required for it to be read loudly enough to hear one's own words (Sha'ar Hatziyun 799:7). Accordingly, one who is hearing impaired is unable to fulfill the mitzvah of Megillah. One who can hear through the assistance of a mechanical hearing aid, however, is fully obligated (Sha'arei Teshuva 799:2, M.B. 589:4, see Mikraei Kodesh, Chanukah 11). However, many authorities disagree and maintain that one who reads does not need to hear anything. Therefore, people who cannot hear should make an effort to read the Megillah themselves (M.B. 789:5, Sha'ar Hatziyun 9), as they cannot fulfill their obligation by someone else reading in their presence since they do not hear the reading.

⁸ Shulchan Aruch 789:2. It is imperative that one hear the Megillah from a reader who is equally obligated in the mitzvah, to the exclusion of a child (a boy under 13 or a girl under 12) who is not formally obligated. However, one may hear the Megillah from a man who has already fulfilled his obligation. However, a woman who has already read or heard the Megillah and fulfilled her obligation cannot read for others who have not yet fulfilled their obligation (Biur Halacha 789).

There is a discussion whether a woman can read the Megillah for a man since the nature of their obligation may be somewhat different. See Tosafot Megillah 4a, Shulchan Aruch 789:2. A woman who cannot attend the reading in shul, may read the Megillah for herself (M.B. 789:8). While some consider it preferable for her to hear the reading rather than read it herself (M.B. 789:8 from Magen Avrohom), if a woman cannot hear the Megillah being read she should make an effort to read it herself from a proper scroll (M.B. 8, Sha'ar

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provided that it is being read from a kosher Megillah scroll.

4. Ideally, one should attend a shul where there will be a large gathering of people for the Megillah reading.⁹ If this is not possible, one should at least try to hear the Megillah in the presence of a minyan.¹⁰

5. Before reading the Megillah, three Brachot (blessings) are recited. The first Brachah is on the mitzvah of reading the Megillah. The second Brachah is in appreciation of the Purim miracle. And the third Bracha, “Shehechyanu,” is recited to articulate our feelings of being privileged with the opportunity to perform this mitzvah.¹¹ If the Megillah is read with a minyan, custom dictates that a final Brachah be recited upon the conclusion of the reading.¹²

6. While reciting the blessing of “Shehechyanu” one should have in mind that this blessing covers all the other mitzvot of Purim as well as the Megillah reading.¹³

Hatziyun 16). Some consider it improper for a woman to read publicly, even if it is only for other women (Sha'ar Hatziyun 789:15).

⁹ Mishnah Berurah 790:62. The Megillah effects a greater publicizing of the miracle when it is read in the presence of a larger crowd.

¹⁰ Although one can fulfill their obligation to read the Megillah without a minyan, it is preferable to hear it in the presence of a minyan (Shulchan Aruch 790:18). If one is going to be reading for others, it is especially important to read it in the presence of a minyan (cf. Shulchan Aruch 789:5).

¹¹ There is a disagreement between Shulchan Aruch and Rama as to whether the “Shehechyanu” should be repeated at the daytime reading of the Megillah (792:1). The Rama’s rationale for repeating it is that the daytime reading is the primary mitzvah, as stated above (M.B. 792:2).

¹² Although some allow the concluding blessing to be recited even for a private reading, Biur Halacha (792) rules that since it is a debate and this blessing is only a custom, it is preferable not to recite it in the absence of a minyan.

¹³ These other mitzvot would not warrant a separate blessing, since they are done regularly and do not stand out as special mitzvot that come only once a year (M.B. 792:1). Some authorities rule that the day of Purim (and Chanukah) necessitates a blessing of “Shehechyanu” just like the biblical holidays (M.B. 792:1 and Biur Halacha). Some say that the second blessing,

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7. One may choose to read along with the reader as long as they are reading from a kosher scroll.¹⁴ Otherwise, one should follow the reading silently.¹⁵
8. Both the reader and the listeners must have intent to fulfill their mitzvah with the reading.¹⁶
9. When reading the Megillah in public, the reader should stand.¹⁷ For private readings, the reader may sit. Even for private readings, the reader and listeners should stand for the recitation of the Brachot, but may then sit down for the reading.¹⁸
10. It is imperative that the Megillah be read in the correct order.¹⁹ If people arrive late, they cannot listen to the later chapters and then afterward make up what they missed by

which expresses our appreciation for the miracle, is also not exclusive to the Megillah reading but covers the entire holiday of Purim. Accordingly, one should have the other mitzvot of the day in mind when reciting this blessing (Biar Halacha).

¹⁴ In the absence of a personal Megillah scroll, one should not read along (790:4). Some authorities assume the reason is for fear of disturbing others, in which case one should not do so even if they have a kosher scroll. However, others assume that reading by oneself will result in not being attentive to the reader and would therefore be equivalent to reading without a proper scroll (M.B. 790:13).

¹⁵ In order to fulfill the mitzvah of the Megillah, every single word must be heard. It is therefore important to remain silent and refrain from speaking during the Megillah reading (792:2). One may not even speak about Torah during the reading. If one accidentally spoke and missed a word of the Megillah, they would fail to fulfill their mitzvah.

¹⁶ It is assumed that one who reads for a group intends to read for all listeners; explicit intent for each individual is not necessary. Similarly, all listeners are assumed to have intent, provided that they are inside the sanctuary. Their presence in shul is a sufficient indication of their desire to fulfill their mitzvah obligation (Shulchan Aruch 790:14, M.B. 49).

¹⁷ Shulchan Aruch (790:1). The reader must show respect for the group by standing. The authorities discuss whether leaning also qualifies as standing (Biar Halacha).

¹⁸ M.B. 790:1

¹⁹ Shulchan Aruch 790:6

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reading the earlier ones. Rather, they must read or listen to the entire scroll in the correct order, from the beginning to the end.

11. There is a custom to unroll and fold up the Megillah to resemble a letter before it is read.²⁰

12. It is customary to make noise upon hearing the name of Haman. The noisemaking symbolizes the eradication of anti-Semites.²¹

13. It is proper to bring children to shul to hear the Megillah reading, provided that they are mature enough to maintain the proper decorum.²²

²⁰ Shulchan Aruch 790:17. At the completion of the reading, the Megillah is rolled up prior to the reciting of the final blessing. Some have a custom that even individuals who are following the reading with their own private Megillah also fold it to resemble a letter.

²¹ Rama 790:17. Rama records that the custom of banging upon hearing the name of Haman in the Megillah evolved from an ancient custom of writing Haman's name on a stone and banging the stone on the ground to erase the name. Some authorities take this noisemaking seriously; whereas others frown on it, as it is generally disruptive (M.B. 59). The Rama takes this opportunity to remind us that it is wrong to invalidate or even mock an accepted Jewish custom. Obviously, this is to the exclusion of "customs" that are Biblically or Rabbinically forbidden (Biur Halacha quoting Chatam Sofer).

²² Shulchan Aruch (789:6) encourages this practice to train children in the importance of publicizing the Purim miracle and realizing the good that G-d has done for us. However, the Mishnah Berurah (18) comments that young children are often brought to shul solely for the purpose of banging upon hearing the name of Haman, rather than focusing on the actual reading of the Megillah. They tend to distract others from concentrating on the reading and it would be preferable for them to stay at home. Parents often have expectations of their children that are not age appropriate. It is the parent's responsibility to ensure that their children are not making it difficult for people to hear every word of the Megillah reading.

The language of the Shulchan Aruch troubles the Biur Halacha. Why does the Shulchan Aruch state (789) that it is merely a "custom" to bring children to shul? Parents are obligated to train their children in the performance of mitzvot, and that should create a bona fide obligation to bring children to shul

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II. Charity for the Poor – Matanot L'evyonim

1. Every man and woman is required to give charity to two poor people on the day²³ of Purim.²⁴
2. The charity can be in the form of money or food.²⁵ The charity should be distributed on the day of Purim, not before or after.²⁶
3. Even poor people can fulfill this obligation by simply swapping their meals with one another.²⁷

to hear the Megillah reading, not just a custom. Perhaps the Shulchan Aruch is referring to children who are too young to train in the importance of attending shul. The Shulchan Aruch is saying that it was still customary to bring them to shul so long as they can remain quiet, similar to the mitzvah of Hakhel, where even young children were brought to the Temple for the post sabbatical Torah reading. See Tosafot Chagigah 3a.

²³ Like the other mitzvot of Purim, this must be done during the day and not at night (M.B. 795:22). The only mitzvah of Purim performed at night is the nighttime Megillah reading.

²⁴ Shulchan Aruch 794:1. Although there is a mitzvah to give charity all year long, normally there are no specific instructions as to when and where to give the charity. However, on Purim there is a Rabbinic institution to distribute charity to poor people in order to enable them to celebrate the holiday with a festive meal. Therefore, on Purim day, the distribution of funds to the poor would even take precedence over distributing funds to the JSN.

²⁵ M.B. 794:2. The minimum size of the gift is not specified and can therefore be as little as a “*perutah*,” approximately the value of an American nickel. Clearly, one is encouraged to give according to their ability and not limit their giving to the minimum required. To paraphrase the language of Maimonides, there is no greater joy in life than bringing happiness to the hearts of orphans, widows and the poor.

²⁶ The Biur Halacha (794) notes that it is also customary to distribute money prior to Purim day, because we assume that one will again have an opportunity to distribute some money on the actual day of Purim to fulfill their obligation.

²⁷ M.B. 794:2. One who cannot afford to give a gift may use this method of reciprocation to fulfill the mitzvah. However, it is questionable if one fulfills the mitzvah when they give a gift with a legally binding stipulation that it be returned (Biur Halacha).

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4. Money committed to charity due to some prior commitment cannot be used in the fulfillment of this mitzvah.²⁸
5. When distributing money on Purim, it is not necessary to research the true needs of the petitioner; rather one should donate unstintingly to all who seek assistance.²⁹
6. In wealthy communities where there are no poor people, one should make an effort to donate to an organization that will distribute the money on Purim day.³⁰
7. Some cities have a custom to distribute funds to the gentile poor people as well, but this would only be in addition to the distribution of funds to the Jewish poor.³¹
8. Aside from the mitzvah to give charity on the day of Purim, it is customary to give three half-dollars before Purim in commemoration of the half-shekel tax that was collected annually at this time of year to pay for the communal offerings in the Beit Hamikdash (Holy Temple in Jerusalem).³²

²⁸ M.B. 794:3

²⁹ Shulchan Aruch 794:3

³⁰ Shulchan Aruch 794:4 advises that if one cannot find needy Jews, the money can be put aside on Purim to be distributed when poor people become accessible. This is true despite the fact that the original establishment of this mitzvah was in order to provide the poor with funds for the celebration of the holiday.

³¹ Shulchan Aruch 794:3. This custom is based on the rationale that we must maintain good relations with our gentile neighbors. Nonetheless, Mishnah Berurah (794:10) points out that in situations where there is no expectation for Jewish money to be distributed to gentiles, all money should be distributed to the Jewish poor.

³² Being that this tax was only collected from men of twenty years and older, some argue that this custom only applies to those who are over twenty. Other authorities disagree and feel that any male over the age of thirteen should donate. Customarily, a father gives for his children and even his unborn son.

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III. Giving Presents of Food – Mishloach Manot

1. One is required to send³³ two types³⁴ of food items³⁵ to a fellow Jew³⁶ on the day of Purim.³⁷
2. One may send the gift before Purim, provided that it will be received on the day of Purim.³⁸
3. One must use food items that are ready to eat as is, and are not in need of significant preparation.³⁹

³³ There is a debate whether to take the term “send” literally. Some authorities believe it to be preferable to send the gifts via a messenger rather than to personally deliver them (see M.B. 795:18). Most believe that the method in which they arrive at their destination is insignificant.

³⁴ Biur Halacha (795) cites Chayei Adam that one must send gifts that are fit for the receiver. Therefore, if one is sending a gift to a distinguished person, the gift must be distinguished as well. However, most authorities maintain that regardless of who is receiving the gift, two food items are sufficient.

³⁵ Drinks are also acceptable. Mishnah Berurah (795:20) explains that one cannot fulfill this mitzvah by giving clothes or other items. This is in opposition to an opinion cited in Be'er Haitev (7) who maintains that if the items can be easily exchanged for food, the giver has fulfilled his obligation. The opinion of the Be'er Haitev seems difficult to understand since based on the his rationale, money, which can easily be exchanged for food, should also qualify. It is difficult to accept that money may be used as a gift since the giving of gifts of food was introduced as an obligation independent of distributing charity. In accordance with the ruling of the Mishnah Berurah, if a gift package of various non-food items is sent, it must also include at least two food or drink items.

³⁶ Biur Halacha (795) cites Turei Even that if one sends edible gifts to a poor person, they may simultaneously fulfill both the mitzvah of sending presents and the mitzvah of giving charity to the poor. See previous note. It seems logical to differentiate between food items which can be used for both charity and gifts of food, as opposed to money which can be used for charity but not for Mishloach Manot.

³⁷ The gifts are meant to be used for the festive meal on Purim day.

³⁸ Be'er Haitev (795:7) in the name of Yad Aharon.

³⁹ The precise definition of “significant preparation” is unclear. Some authorities maintain that raw food in need of cooking may not be used. Others permit the sending of raw food. See Rashi Beitza 14b who defines “manot” as

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4. There is popular misconception that one must use two foods that require different blessings, but in truth, any two distinct food items are acceptable.⁴⁰
5. Both men and women are equally obligated to perform this mitzvah.⁴¹
6. This mitzvah must be performed during the day and not at night.⁴²
7. The purpose of this mitzvah is to create friendship and goodwill between Jews. Therefore, if one sends gifts and the receiver refuses them, one has fulfilled their obligation.⁴³ Conversely, if one sends a package

prepared food that is usually used on the day it is prepared, to the exclusion of food that is generally not used the same day it is received.

The Be'er Haitev records an interesting question where one had sent meat as a gift and after the receiver ate it, the giver realized that it had not been kosher. The Be'er Haitev entertains the possibility that, in fact, the mitzvah was fulfilled, since the gift accomplished its purpose of generating goodwill (at least prior to the discovery of its true nature!), and the gift did provide the recipient with food for the meal.

⁴⁰ This is evident from the Rambam's list of suggested food items. See Maimonides, Laws of Megillah 2:14.

⁴¹ Some authorities maintain that a married woman fulfills her obligation with her husband's gifts and is therefore not required to send her own gifts (M.B. 795:25). Nonetheless, it is preferable for her to send her own gifts.

⁴² Rama (795:4). Obviously, one may give gifts to their friends and charity to the poor on the night of Purim, provided that they remember to give a gift of two food items to at least one friend and charity to at least two poor people on the day of Purim as well (M.B. 795:22).

⁴³ Rama (795). The ruling of the Rama is apparently based on the idea that the purpose of this mitzvah is to generate feelings of goodwill between Jews, which was accomplished by the gesture of sending a respectable gift, even if the gift was rejected. However, Mishnah Berurah (795:24) cites others who disagree and maintain that the gifts are only effective if they are actually accepted. It seems that these opinions understand that the purpose of the gifts is to provide food and thereby increase the celebration of Purim. It would therefore follow that without the receiver accepting the gifts, this goal has not been achieved. According to either reason, the mitzvah would not be fulfilled

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anonymously, the sender does not fulfill their obligation.⁴⁴

8. It is questionable if one can fulfill their obligation by sending gifts to a minor.⁴⁵

9. If one is traveling, it is questionable whether their obligation is fulfilled by means of the gifts that their family is delivering back at home. It is therefore preferable for them to give food packages of their own, wherever they happen to be.⁴⁶

10. One is encouraged to increase the number of gifts distributed according to their means.⁴⁷

11. One who cannot afford to give a gift can swap gifts with his friend.⁴⁸

if the gifts were sent with the stipulation that they be returned (Sha'arei Teshuva 795:4). See also Chatam Sofer O.C. 196.

⁴⁴ Ketav Sofer O.C. 141 posits that this would be dependent on the reason behind the mitzvah of sending gifts. If the mitzvah is to create goodwill and friendship, it is not achieved unless the receiver is aware of the identity of the sender. However, if the mitzvah is simply to provide food for the meal, it has certainly been accomplished.

⁴⁵ Aruch Hashulchan 695:18. See Mikraei Kodesh (39:2) who assumes that a minor is included in "re'ehu" and one does fulfill the mitzvah.

⁴⁶ Aruch Hashulchan 696:3 comments that the sending of gifts and the sending of charity to the poor may be different in this respect. The mitzvah of Mishloach Manot may have to be performed personally, whereas the mitzvah of charity is simply that some of your money should go to the poor, therefore this can be fulfilled by the donations distributed by the traveler's family back at home if they are using his funds. See Mikraei Kodesh (39) who explains that since the purpose of gifts is to generate goodwill, when one is not at home and is not involved in choosing to whom to send, it will not result in goodwill or increased friendship. On the other hand, if the purpose of the gifts is simply to provide food for the holiday, as is the opinion of Terumat Hadeshen, then one would be able to fulfill the mitzvah by means of the gifts sent by his family. However, one can argue that goodwill will be generated even when not actively involved in the decision making process of to whom to send the gifts.

⁴⁷ Shulchan Aruch (795:4)

⁴⁸ Shulchan Aruch (795:4)

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12. No formal blessing is made on the giving of gifts or on the giving of charity to the poor.⁴⁹

IV. Celebrating with a Festive Meal – Seudat Purim

1. There is a mitzvah to have a formal meal on the day of Purim.⁵⁰
2. One should not eat the meal alone, but rather together with family and friends.⁵¹
3. Although the festive meal is on the day of Purim,⁵² there is a mitzvah to celebrate the night before as well.⁵³
4. During the meal, one should drink more wine than they are accustomed to and then take a short nap to fulfill the custom of “drinking on Purim until you cannot distinguish between cursing Haman and blessing Mordechai.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Mikraei Kodesh (40) explains that according to Rashbah no blessing is recited on mitzvot that are beyond the control of the giver because the ability of performing the mitzvah is dependent on the acceptance of the receiver. This answer would suffice according to the opinions that if the receiver denies acceptance of the gift, the giver does not fulfill his mitzvah. However, according to Rama that even a failed attempt to give fulfills the mitzvah, the rationale for not making a blessing would have to be based on Maimonides (Laws of Brachot 11:2) that blessings are only made on mitzvot between man and G-d and not on mitzvot between man and his fellow.

⁵⁰ It is customary to eat a formal meal with bread similar to a Shabbat meal where bread is required. However, Sha'arei Teshuva (795:1) cites an opinion that one does not have to eat bread.

⁵¹ Be'er Haitev (795:9) cites Rashi on Megillat Esther (9:28) and M.B. 795:9. The reason for this is that one cannot properly celebrate the holiday when eating in solitude.

⁵² Rama (795:1). Although Purim begins at night, the climax of the festivities is during the day and that is when the meal should be enjoyed.

⁵³ Rama (795:1)

⁵⁴ This recommendation is made by Rama (795:1) and encouraged by Mishnah Berurah (795:5). Mikraei Kodesh (44) explains that the Rama holds that one should drink to the point where the alcohol puts them to sleep. Although there are those who drink excessively on Purim, one must be careful to maintain dignity and not rationalize inappropriate behavior in the

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5. Ideally, the meal should take place in the afternoon following the Minchah service.⁵⁵ Although the meal may extend into the evening hours, the majority of the meal should be celebrated before nightfall.⁵⁶
6. It is customary to learn Torah before sitting down to the meal.⁵⁷
7. Some authorities rule that one is not held responsible for inadvertent damages caused on Purim as a result of the festivities.⁵⁸

name of religion. Chayei Adam (Biur Halacha) warns specifically against drinking to the point where one will be unable to recite the Grace after Meals. See Biur Halacha (795) who discusses how there can be an institution to drink which seems to contradict the values of the Torah. He concludes that since the drinking of wine played such a central role in the story of Megillat Esther, we commemorate that by drinking. However, he emphasizes the importance of maintaining appropriate decorum. It is worth noting that the Talmud refers to drinking on Purim with the uncommon term, "*lebesumay*." Some interpret this word to mean "rejoicing," rather than drinking an intoxicating beverage (Biur Halacha 795 in name of Meiri). The Meiri comments that we are not commanded to degrade ourselves and behave frivolously, but rather rejoice in a way that will build our devotion to G-d and His mitzvot.

⁵⁵ Rama 795:2. The reason for delaying the meal until after Minchah is to provide time for people to fulfill the mitzvah of sending gifts to one another earlier in the day (M.B. 8).

⁵⁶ Shulchan Aruch 795:1; Rama 795:2

⁵⁷ Rama 795:2. This is indicated by the verse "and to the Jews there was light and joy" (Esther 8:16). "Light" refers to the light of Torah, and "joy" refers to the meal. Since the verse mentions Torah before the meal, we too should follow that pattern. Presumably, the purpose is to ensure that the conversation at the Purim meal will focus on the beauty of Torah study and mitzvot.

⁵⁸ Rama 795:2. It is important to note that this only applies to damages that are inadvertently caused as a result of the festivities. If one intended to cause damage for the sake of damaging or harming another, they are held fully accountable. Furthermore, this leniency applies only to minor monetary damages. It does not apply to major damages, nor does it apply to personal injury (M.B. 795:13). In short, if one suffers damages on Purim, get a good attorney!

Learning to Play the Game of Torah

Rabbi Daniel Steinberg

The Talmud tells us that the Jewish nation reaccepted the Torah in the days of Achashveirosh. “‘The Jews confirmed and accepted...’ (Esther 9:27), i.e. they reconfirmed what they had accepted long before.”¹ Although the scriptural words “they confirmed and accepted” refer to the institution of the holiday of Purim itself, the Talmud understands that it refers to a reacceptance of the Torah as well. On the first Purim, the Jews confirmed and reaccepted what they had undertaken 1,000 years earlier at Sinai – the Torah and all of Jewish tradition.² Purim is thus an opportune time for us to reassess our relationship with Torah learning.

Torah study is of paramount importance in Judaism. “The study of Torah is equivalent to all the mitzvot [of the Torah].”³ That means that if you have a choice of activities available to you, you should choose Torah study.⁴

Have you ever considered what the *purpose* is of a lifelong engagement with Torah? What’s the point of studying *any* subject, for that matter? People often study in order to assimilate information and subsequently apply it on some practical level. The same could be said for Torah study. It’s

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the ultimate instruction manual for Life, teaching us the Jewish way to behave in all situations. However, when it comes to Torah study, there is more to it than just practical application.⁵

I invite you to walk over to your local Beit Midrash (house of Torah study) and to peek over somebody's shoulder to see what they're learning. What did you see? Most likely you observed sets of people studying together. Typically, a set consists of two partners, or *chavrutot*. "Studying" is really too tame a word to describe what's going on. "Fierce debate" is more like it. Each *chavruta* is passionately attempting to defend his reading of the text. The arguments fly back and forth with an increasing sense of urgency. You, the detached observer, having walked into the study hall for the first time, are understandably curious. What's everyone fighting about? You approach one of the debating parties and ask for an explanation.

"He has the nerve to say that Rashi⁶ holds that when witnesses are responsible for the exile of an innocent man to the city of refuge..." Wait a second. Witnesses? City of refuge? They're studying the Talmudic tractate Makkot, which defines the conditions under which an accidental killer is sent to a city of refuge. But it's been ages since this topic was last applicable. There is no Jewish court (Beit Din) today which exiles people to a city of refuge. Of what relevance is it to these two what Rashi did or did not say on the subject?

These must be special students, you presume, students who have dedicated themselves to preserving the Torah in its entirety for the next generation. You dismiss them as a rarity and move on to another set. But this next pair is arguing about a sticky issue in Yevamot, the tractate of Talmud which deals with the defunct mitzvah of *yibum*, the marriage of a brother-in-law to his widowed and childless sister-in-law.⁷ Two others across the room are splitting hairs over the ingredients of a sacrificial meal offering. You struggle to produce some sensible explanation for why all these people are getting worked up over

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a point whose outcome makes absolutely no practical difference. Are these students striving to glean lessons of ethics and morality contained in these mitzvot? No, that's not it either.

You start to get desperate. Isn't there anyone in here studying something of practical importance? Finally, you stumble upon some students discussing the laws of what to do when you find a lost object. Great. You found a five-dollar bill on the street this morning. So you listen in, eager to hear what they have to say.

"So that means I can keep it?" you ask.

"Oh, you can't determine that from here. You'll have to look that up in the Shulchan Aruch (code of Jewish Law). We're just analyzing the Mishnah. There's quite a distance between what's written in the Mishnah and the practical application of the law."

"But if all the answers are in the Shulchan Aruch," your voice begins to waver. "Why not just study that? What's the point of heatedly arguing about what *you* think the Mishnah means?"

Rabbis from time immemorial have prescribed a diet of irrelevant Torah study for the Jewish nation. Traditionally, kindergarteners begin with the story of Creation, a mysterious and esoteric text that certainly lacks any apparent application. From there our five and six year olds graduate to the study of Leviticus, where they are introduced to the evergreen subject of animal sacrifice. We could easily spend a lifetime studying the practical topics of Judaism without ever venturing into sections long ago relegated to the status of pure academics. So why is so much time spent focusing on the irrelevant?

Let us digress for a moment. It was the Greeks who brought philosophy, drama, literature, poetry and plays to the Western world. With the Olympic Games, they introduced

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athletic competitions. These innovations transformed games and other diverting pastimes into ends in and of themselves. Man should not live in order to work, Hellenist culture proclaimed. Work should be a means to real life, i.e. entertainment and games.

What is it that makes playing a game, or even doing nothing at all, so enjoyable? Why is it that the things that are the most fun to do are the things that have no higher purpose? Walking to get somewhere is not half as enjoyable as a stroll in the park with no destination in mind. The kind of information that people find the most fascinating is trivia. One of the most popular television shows of all time was about... nothing.

The answer to this basic question reveals a profound truth about the human condition.

Human life happens to be the one thing that is most easily recognizable as coming from a divine source. While man can theoretically accumulate all that he needs to survive and create a façade of self-reliance, least *subconsciously* we all know that our lives are in G-d's hands. To this day, nobody has ever figured out how to store up life. As the saying goes, "When it's your time, it's your time." G-d is the source of life and consequently, G-d is also the source of all of life's joys and pleasures. It is thus at times that we experience life's pleasures that our awareness of G-d is heightened.

When you are engaged in an activity that has a purpose, your focus is completely centered on achieving your goal. Your mind is thus taken off of life, pleasure and G-d-consciousness. On the other hand, when you are not engaged in the pursuit of a particular goal, your mind naturally focus on the wonder of being alive. It turns out that being "distracted" actually *is* living.

King David often used the unusual word "*sha'ashua*" to describe Torah.⁸ The Hebrew "*sha'a*" means to turn towards something (cf. Genesis 4:4). The double usage of the root

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“*sha’a*” in “*sha’ashua*” can be translated as a turn towards the turning. In other words, when I am engaged in a “*sha’ashua*,” I am not turning towards anything other than the fact that I’m turning. That’s the definition of a game. No purpose to it. The description of Torah as a *sha’ashua* is teaching us to relate the same way to Torah.

The Greeks were right. We’re supposed to live to play, not to work. But what game should we play? G-d gave us His game. The Sages state that G-d *plays* with the Torah (Mishlei 8:30).⁹ While the rest of the world occupies itself with its man-invented pastimes, the Jews are supposed to look to the divine game of Torah. We should relate to Torah study as our uniquely Jewish form of entertainment and recreation.

But if being distracted is really living, why choose to experience life through the “game” of Torah over any other recreational activity? The answer is that the game of Torah results in an entirely different type of life. One can experience existence in a variety of ways, but when it is done through internalizing and enjoying the wisdom of Torah, the expressed Mind of G-d, man transcends his own existence. Torah forges an intimate bond between G-d’s thought and the human mind and soul, a bond which elevates man. It is something which must be experienced to be appreciated. If you have ever had the pleasure to be involved in a particularly focused and rigorous session of in-depth Torah study, the kind where you begin to feel fireworks going off inside your head, you can attest to those extraordinary moments during which your soul tells you, “This is just what I’ve been searching for.”

The goal, beyond mitzvah observance, is to play and have fun with the Torah. There is no need for a relevant point other than the pleasure of the study itself.¹⁰

This is the main mitzvah of learning Torah – to rejoice, be happy and take pleasure in learning. Then the words of Torah are absorbed into [the student’s] blood; since

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pleasure was derived from Torah, the person becomes attached to Torah...

One who learns for the sake of the mitzvah and derives pleasure from the learning, it is entirely holy – because the pleasure itself is also a mitzvah.

R. Avraham Borenstein (1839-1910)

This explains our strange curriculum. The city of refuge is not a practical topic for us anymore. Nor is *yibum* (levirate marriage) in practice today. True, it would make a lot of sense to dedicate the majority of our time studying civil law, Jewish ethics or the laws of Shabbat. But observance of Jewish law is not the sole purpose of Torah study. Jewish children begin their career of learning with abstract concepts and Jewish adults continue to focus on inapplicable parts of Torah because we wish to appreciate Torah not merely as a practical reference guide, but as an inspiring, lifelong source of fun.

II

The world's playthings are more stylish and more captivating than Torah. The distractions of modern life are seductive and quickly capture our senses. After all, can you compare the sweeping effect on your senses produced by a magnificent film, replete with an equally dramatic score... with a dry piece of Talmud concerning two people who walk into court fighting over the right to a Tallit? Torah study is an abstract, intellectual pursuit. These other things don't require the functioning of your analytical side. They usually just go straight into the mind, without necessitating any active thought on the part of the recipient. Can learning about the details of sacrificial offerings accomplish the same thing as a Broadway show? The answer to the above question is yes. But it's also no.

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Yes. It is possible to identify with and relate to the characters and events of the Written and Oral Torah as deeply as to any in Hollywood. It just requires a willingness on the part of the student to use his *own* imagination to fill in the necessary details and bring it all to life. Learning as a distraction has to be an *active* process performed by the learner.

Consider this advice from Rabbi Tzvi Zobin, a leading Jewish educator in Jerusalem:

Tell a story. What is happening? Who is doing or saying what to whom? Describe the scene. Sit back, relax, and try to see the story taking place in your mind's eye. A daydreamer has a head start. Luzzatto lists the ability to imagine as the prime skill when attempting to understand a statement. The skills of understanding words and being able to make deductions take second place to it.¹¹

Let's take a simple example from the Torah. The episode of Rachel begging Jacob to give her children is a tense, dramatic encounter between husband and wife. All we have in the text is the skeleton of the scene, but it provides the Director's instructions for the mood. We, as the active artists, are meant to use our imagination and paint these Torah pictures onto the canvas of our souls, to print them onto our psyche, to project them against the screen of our brain. When we animate Torah concepts in this way, the Torah comes alive.

Once upon a time, Torah was the entertainment of the Jewish people. Jews savored every detail; we were connoisseurs of Torah. The great Maggidim (preachers) of old graphically described Torah scenes, often illuminating entire biblical episodes with their captivating oratory. These teachers would employ humor as deftly as professional comedians. They painted pictures with words and moved their audience to tears by the sheer beauty and power of their commentary. If the

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Torah is to be our “*sha’ashua*,” our joy in life, this is exactly what we must do.

It is one thing to bring Biblical stories to life, but what about the Talmud? The climate of adventure and entertainment in the Talmud isn't merely dry, it's downright arid! What can be fun about a cold, logical argument?

When I studied in Jerusalem, I would walk back and forth from yeshiva each day struggling with the cases of the Talmud. I toyed with different ideas in my mind, occasionally succeeding to produce vivid, if somewhat comical, portrayals of Talmudic passages.

The following is a sample of my own “playing” with the Torah in Jerusalem. It is a script for an audio production of the Talmud, employing various sound effects and character voices to convey the story.¹² Before we get to the script, a little background information is in order:

The Jewish court, the Beit Din, cannot prosecute a violation of a biblical commandment unless the perpetrator received a formal warning immediately prior to committing the sin. In order for this warning to qualify, the “Eidim,” the witnesses to the crime, must correctly name the particular prohibition that is about to be transgressed, i.e. “Do not transgress commandment X.” If the person was warned before his sin, but the warning was inaccurate and did not define the sin correctly, the courts cannot prosecute.

The Talmud is therefore interested in classifying all forbidden acts. Take Shabbat, for example. Shabbat is a day of rest and on Shabbat thirty-nine different types of labor are proscribed. Since each of these types is actually a set of similar actions, the courts need to know which acts belong to which category.

All kinds of farming work is forbidden on Shabbat, but when someone is about to perform an act of either weeding a

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field or watering seeds, which one of the thirty-nine forbidden labors should he be warned against violating? Here we have a Talmudic debate.

- Rabba says that the Eidim, the witnesses, should warn such a person not to perform the forbidden task of plowing on Shabbat. The actions of weeding and watering seeds both bear a resemblance to the task of plowing; like plowing, they soften the earth.
- Rav Yosef says that we warn such a person not to perform the forbidden task of sowing. Weeding and watering both bear a resemblance to sowing; like sowing, they promote a growth of vegetation.
- Abaye says that since weeding and watering result in both the softening of the ground and the growth of vegetation, there are in fact two prohibitions being transgressed here. Witnesses therefore warn the person not to transgress the prohibitions of both “plowing” and “sowing” on Shabbat.

These Talmudic legalities might strike you as a bit boring. Let’s pay a visit to a religious neighborhood in Jerusalem, 2200 years ago:

Eidim

MUSIC UP: “Eidim, Eidim, Whatcha gonna do, Whatcha gonna do when they come warn you.”

NARRATOR: This special edition of “Eidim” is not taped, because it’s Shabbat, on location with the men of Shabbat enforcement.¹³ Don’t ask us how you’re hearing it now. All suspects are innocent until the Beit Din finds them guilty.

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POLICE RADIO: We've got a possible 03 and/or 04 in progress at 675 Westwood Court.

WITNESS#1: We got a report from a neighbor of a Jewish male, about 5'8", in gardening clothes looking as if he's about to do some weeding and watering work in his garden on the southwest portion of town.

WITNESS#2: We're gonna walk over there now since it's Shabbat and we can't drive. See if there's anybody there that fits that description.

(FOOTSTEPS, GUSTY WINDS)

WITNESS#1: It looks like we're coming up on the house, and we think this is the suspect in the front yard, so me and Lipschitz are going to go over and talk to him.

WITNESS#2: How ya doin'? You mind if we ask you a few questions?

SUSPECT: I'm great. I'm doing ok.

WITNESS#1: How's your Shabbat going?

SUSPECT: Good. How are you?

WITNESS#1: I'm not so good, 'cause you were picking up the watering can over there.

SUSPECT: I was just movin' it because I need the space that it occupies.

WITNESS#1: Uh huh. It's a nice garden you got here. Looks like somebody's been doing some weeding. You know anything about that?

SUSPECT: No, not really.

(RUNNING, CHASING SOUNDS)

WITNESS#2: WE'VE GOT OURSELVES A RUNNER!!!
HE'S RUNNING ACROSS THE GARDEN!!!

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WITNESS#1: DROP THE CAN!!!

WITNESS#2: DROP IT NOW!!!

SUSPECT: NO!!!

WITNESS#2: HE'S GONNA WATER THE PLANT!!

WITNESS#1: We're warning you. If you water that plant, you'll be violating the commandment not to plow on Shabbat.

SUSPECT: Plowing? I'm not plowing. I just don't want my plants to dry out.

WITNESS#1: When you water the ground, it softens it. Just like plowing softens the earth.

WITNESS#2: And you'll also be violating the commandment not to sow.

SUSPECT: To sow? I don't get it. I'm not planting anything.

WITNESS#2: Watering helps things grow, just like when you plant a seed in the ground you make something grow.

WITNESS#1: Why don't you come back with us, have some cholent, sleep this off, and then you can do all the weeding and watering you want tomorrow.

SUSPECT: But my garden...

WITNESS#1: It'll be ok till after Shabbat, I promise.

MUSIC: "Eidim, Eidim, Whatcha gonna do, Whatcha gonna do when they come warn you."

NARRATOR: If you see a Jew about to desecrate the Sabbath, call your local Eidim agency right away. But not by phone, obviously, because it's Shabbat.

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The colorful background details of this piece of Talmud are obviously my own invention, to help me better understand the nature of the case. I also took the liberty to create some additional characters. By the time I had finished playing, a real story had formed, one that included all of the pertinent laws and salient ideas present in this section of Talmud. Living proof that even the Talmud can be entertaining.

This is my project and I hope to do this with everything that I learn. In the end, with G-d's help, I'll possess a whole stockpile of illuminated Torah "episodes." But everyone should strive to play their own games with their Torah learning. Every Jew can produce a unique version of Torah, provided the study is intellectually honest with no goal other than the truth of Torah itself. This is what is meant by our personal "portion" of Torah.¹⁴

These days I look forward to opening up a Talmud. Who knows which unique characters I'll meet today? Maybe someone like the man in Nedarim (89B) who took a vow proscribing all physical pleasures. (Since clothing happens to fall under that category, he dressed himself in a suit of mud instead.) To which exotic locale will I be traveling today? Pumbedisa? Alexandria? Caesaria?

Torah is called a "*sha'ashua*" for a reason and that point demands our attention. It means that Torah study must be fun and exciting. It's a game. It should not be superficial or distant, the equivalent of a lifetime spent poring over irrelevant law cases.

This Purim, the day on which we renewed our vows to G-d, open a classic Torah text and take a moment to view Torah from this perspective, as a source of entertainment. To one who knows how to relate to Torah study properly, a thrilling experience awaits. Escape the goal-driven madness of "modern" life and have some fun with some divine wisdom. Learn Torah!

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¹ Talmud, Shabbat 88a

² When the Jews realized that G-d had not abandoned them in their exile, they reaccepted the Torah with love. The events of Purim also demonstrated rabbinic wisdom; Mordechai and Esther saved the nation *without* the assistance of prophecy, so the Jews embraced Rabbinic teachings and law.

³ Talmud, Shabbat 127a

⁴ Of course, things aren't always that simple. Some people do not have the temperament, capability or financial freedom to study Torah all the time.

⁵ This essay is based in part on a lecture heard from R. Shimshon Pincus zt"l.

⁶ Acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105), preeminent Biblical and Talmudic commentator.

⁷ Today, instead of *yibum*, the Torah's alternative of *chalitzah* is practiced (cf. Deuteronomy 25:5-10).

⁸ Cf. Psalms 119:24,77,92,174.

⁹ Since G-d created the world for the sake of Torah (cf. Rashi to Genesis 1:1), He is understood to be using the Torah not for a purpose outside itself, but rather as an end in and of itself. All of existence can thus find its meaning entirely within Torah.

¹⁰ Just because it is fun does not mean it is not serious. The study of Torah should go hand in hand with Jewish observance. "Enlightened" anti-religious Jews of early 19th century Europe were known to sit in taverns on Shabbat afternoons, enjoying a cigar with their Gemara. They were only half right.

¹¹ From his book, "Breakthrough to Learning Gemara."

¹² The obvious advantage of this approach over video is that it forces the listener to activate their own imagination to conjure up the images. Long before the advent of television, this is what radio used to do. Radio was thus aptly nicknamed the "theatre of the mind."

¹³ It goes without saying that this script is not historical; nothing like this ever happened in a Jewish community. There is no record of "religious police" in Jewish history or in Halachic literature. This script is an illustration of the potential use of comedy as a pedagogical tool in Jewish education.

¹⁴ Siddur, Shabbat Amidah

"הסתר אסתר" - מכתב המגילה

אלא אשת המלך. בלא שר יהודי לא היו היהודים מצליחים להעביר את גזר הדין אשר הופץ לכל קצוות הממלכה, ולהתרומם מתהומות הנשיה – וזוהי "גאולת העם". ומכיוון שמאמר אסתר למלך בשם מרדכי היא החוליה היחידה בסדר המאורעות שהיתה בידי בחירת אדם ולא בידי שמים – גאולת העם נקראת על שמה. הגאולה היא כה נסתרת עד שאפילו מרדכי ואסתר עצמם לא הבינו שגילוי דבר מזימתם של בגתן ותרש למלך תביא לגאולת עולם.

"אל תדמי בנפשך להמלך בית המלך מכל היהודים.
כי אם החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת, רווח והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר-
ואת ובית אביך תאבדו.
ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות!"

בדבריו אלה מרדכי חושף בפנינו שלמרות שהוא נאחז באמונתו שהעם יושע, הוא אינו מודע כלל מאין תבוא הגאולה. לפיכך הוא מטיל את האחריות כולה על אסתר כי "מי יודע" אם לא לשם כך היא הגיעה למלכותה. מסתבר שכל אשר ארע למרדכי בעצמו היה למעשה לגאולת העם כפי שהעידו חכמי המשנה.

נפלאות דרכי הבורא ואין אדם העומד על בוריין אף לאחר התפתחותן, אך אנו מודעים לכך כי הכל בהשגחתו ואין מקריות בעולם.

"הסתר אסתר" - מכתב המגילה

על אותו לילה בו נדדה שנת המלך. כשהביאו לבקשתו את ספר הזכרונות וקראו לפניו את מעשה מרדכי אשר הציל את חייו, החל אחשוורוש לחפש דרך לגמול למרדכי על מעשהו. מזימתו של המן המגיע אל המלך לבקש את רשותו לתלות את מרדכי משתבשת, כאשר הוא מתבקש לעזור לאחשוורוש בפתרון חידה "מה לעשות באיש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו?" ומה גדולה היתה הפתעתו של המן לגלות כי "האיש" הזה לא אחר מאשר מרדכי שאת האישור להמתתו בא לבקש.

מעניין מאד שחכמינו ראו כאן "גאולה לעולם" – ככתוב לעיל. לכאורה, הצלת העם לא תלויה בהצלת מרדכי. נתאר לעצמינו שאותו הלילה שנכנס המן לבקש את רשות המלך לתלות את מרדכי, לא נדדה שנת המלך, והיה מקבל את פני המן ומשיב לו בחיוב, וכתוצאה מכך מרדכי נתלה. עדיין בבוקר שלמחרת היה הסיפור נפרש כמו שקרה באמת – המן היה מגיע שמח במיוחד למשתה השני, אסתר היתה מאשימה את המן באויבות וצוררות כפי שבאמת עשתה, המלך היה תולה את המן, והגזרה היתה נהפכת לששון. אמנם הסיפור היה מרמזותוק, אבל בעיקרו, מוצלח. אם כן איך ראו חכמינו שמה שאמרה אסתר בשם מרדכי היא באמת הסיבה ל"גאולת עולם"?

נדמה כי התשובה מפורשת בכתב המגילה. על גדולת מרדכי מסופר "ומרדכי בא לפני המלך כי הגידה אסתר מה הוא לה. ויסר המלך את טבעתו אשר העביר מהמן ויתנה למרדכי ותשם אסתר את מרדכי על בית המן" (פ"ח). ובהמשך כתוב "ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריך בוץ וארגמן" (שם). וכדי להדגיש שגדולת מרדכי היא שמחת העם – מסיים המקרא במילים "והעיר שושן צהלה ושמחה". זאת ועוד. מסופר גם ש"כל שרי המדינות ... מנשאים את היהודים כי נפל פחד מרדכי עליהם" (ט, ב-ד). השפעת מרדכי בבית המלך היא סיבה לרוממות היהודים בממלכה. ובסוף המגילה אנו קוראים "כי מרדכי היהודי משנה למלך אחשוורוש וגדול ליהודים ורצוי לרוב אחיו דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו". הרי שהצלת מרדכי לא היתה הצלה פרטית. חשובותו של מרדכי בסיפור היא לייצג את העם. אסתר. אמנם יהודיה. אינה

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עליו ולא על שום עם, ובכלל זה היהודים. הרי הם בידו לעשות כחפצו ואין דבר העומד בפניו, אם רק יצליח להחניף ולשחד את אחשוורוש. מסר המקראות הוא שלא נחשף למחשבת המן. המן טועה טעות מוחלטת – יש השגחה בעולם – ורק הוא ניתפס במזימותיו.

על רקע זה נבנית הציניות במקראות. אותן בטויים ממש, שנאמרו ביחס לגזרת המן והשמדת היהודים מתחלפים, ומתארים את נפילת המן והצלת העם. לדוגמא – "והעיר שושן נבוכה" (סוף פ"ג) – "והעיר שושן צהלה ושמחה" (ח, טו). "להשמיד להרוג ולאבד את כל היהודים" (ג, יג) – "להשמיד להרוג ולאבד את כל חיל עם ומדינה הצרים אותם" (ח, יא). "מקום אשר דבר המלך ודתו מגיע אבל גדול ליהודים וצום ובכי ומספד" (ד, ג) – "מקום אשר דבר המלך ודתו מגיע שמחה וששון ליהודים משתה ויום טוב" (ח, יז). המסר אינו רק מסר של "ונהפוך הוא". יש כאן תוכן בעל משמעות עמוקה יותר – קיימת השגחה. שאיפותיו של נבל ורשע ותפיסת עולמו של הפקירות ומקריות בטלה, ואין לה אחיזה במציאות. השילטון וההנהגה בידי בורא העולם, ועמו תחת השגחתו המוחלטת והנצחית.

מסר המגילה בהחלט יכולה היתה להיכתב בבירור ובלא רמזים שאכן יד ההשגחה היתה בדבר. אך המספר נמנע מדרך תיאור זאת מפני שרצה ללמד שכפי שנדקדק ונתעמק בכל מלה ופסוק במגילה על מנת להבין את המסר הנסתר – שגם בחיים חייבים לחקור ולדקדק אחר ההשגחה כדי לחוש את נוכחותה. למרות שההשגחה נסתרת היא, הרי שהאדם נברא עם כל היכולות המאפשרות לו חקירה והתעמקות לגלותה. זוהי גדלות האדם ותפקידו גם יחד.

כל האומר דבר בשם אומרו מביא גאולה לעולם
שנאמר "ותאמר אסתר למלך בשם מרדכי."

אבות ו, ו

כששמע מרדכי את בגתן ותרש אשר זוממים להרע למלך, הוא לא העלה על דעתו שהדיווח למלכות ישתלב במארג הסיפור וכתוצאה מכך תבוא תשועה לעם. אולם כך היה. בפרק ו' מסופר

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קיים מתח ידוע בין המן ומרדכי. המן שקודם במשרתו וזכה לעושר רב, חושב עצמו החביב ביותר בעיני המלך. אולם סרבנותו של מרדכי פוגעת בגאוות המן ואינה מניחה לו עד שיראה אותו מחוסל ו"עם מרדכי" מושמד. סופו של דבר הוא שבטבעת בה החתים המן את שטרות צו הטבח, חותם בה מרדכי את צווי הנקמה באויבי היהודים. מרדכי זוכה בביתו של המן ובגדולתו, ומעשיו נכתבים בדברי הימים של מלכי פרס ומדי, ובעיקר, לנצח, בכתב במגילה. עד כאן התוכן הבסיסי של הסיפור.

מדקדוקי לשון המקראות אנו מבחינים שהמגילה מתכוונת להדגיש יותר מזה.

למשל, שני הפרקים הראשונים עוסקים בסילוק ושתי, הכתרת אסתר ותיעוד מרדכי בספרי המלך, ועיקר הסיפור אינו פותח אלא עד פרק ג', ובמילים "אחר הדברים האלה גידל המלך אחשוורוש את המן". גם בפרק ב' – כמבוא לדרמת המזימה של בגתן ותרש – מסופר ש"ימים ההם ומרדכי יושב בשער המלך". מהי משמעות השימוש בביטויים הללו? במדרשים מוצע שהמגילה מעידה על הכוונת המאורעות, דהיינו – כבר לפני שקודם המן והועשר, מצאו מרדכי ואסתר את עצמם מוכוונים לתשועת העם. מרדכי הושם בחצר המלך בתכלית לגלות את מזימתן של בגתן ותרש כדי להציל את המלך, ואסתר נבחרה למלכות. שני מאורעות שהוכחו גורליים להצלת העם. וכל אלו בהכוונה ובהשגחת אלוקים עוד קודם לגדולת המן ותחבולותיו. על זה כתב רש"י "שנבראת רפואה זו להיות לתשועה לישראל" – כלומר, אסתר ומרדכי הוצבו בעמדתם בכדי שיוכלו לפעול לתועלת העם בזמן הנכון. כלומר, המקרא מסוגנן באופן שבא להשפיע על הקורא. המסר – הסיפור מתפתח בהכוונה ניסית נסתרת.

אחת הבחינות המעניינות ביותר בסיפור היא, שאותה השקפה שהמספר משתדל לבטא היא היפוכה של השקפת הנבל בסיפור – המן. הקורא יכול להרגיש שהמספר עצמו לא רק מעוניין בטובת העם, הוא גם בעצם מתנגד לדוגמתיותו של המן.

בגאוותו מכריז המן על השמדת ההמון, ומגריל את מועד הטבח ומתייחס בזילזול מוחלט לטבח הזה. הגאוה והזילזול – שניהם מושרשים בתפיסה שאין אלוקים משגיח בעולם – לא

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מאת הרב זאב ג'קובס

את התגובה הראשונית לקריאתה של מגילת אסתר ניתן לסכם בשתי מילים – "סיפור מרתק". כרובן של העלילות המודרניות בעלות רקע דרמטי, קיים מתח בין הנבל והמסכן. ואכן בשיא הסיפור נגלה לפנינו את שציפינו מראש – הנבל הובס והמסכן ניצל. אמנם, יש לדעת כי מלבד הכוונה העיקרית של המקראות לדווח על מאורעות בתולדות עמינו, יש להבחין שקיימת מטרה מישנית והיא להשפיע על נקודת מבט הקורא להבין את העבר דרך עיניו של המחבר.

בסיפור המגילה ניתן לומר שמטרה זו היא חשובה במיוחד כיון שהמגילה הופיעה לראשונה שנה לאחר המאורע ונקראה באותו חג הפורים בפני קהילות מלכות אחשוורוש, כמסופר בפרק ט'. הפרספקטיבה של המגילה על המאורע ההיסטורי גם משמשת כאמצעי ליצירת זהות לאומית בתפוצות. ולאורך שנות הגלות פרספקטיבה זו שמשה גם כמקור לחיזוק וריענון מושגי נצחיות האומה ושליחותה בעולם.

בעיון בפרטים תוך שימת-לב לשפת המקרא אנו נחשוף את כוונת המספר לגבש נקודת מסר. המחבר משתדל להשפיע על הקורא, לעיתים באמצעות קטעים שלמים שמביעים את עמדתו בבהירות, ולעיתים תוך שימוש במליצות ותיאורים מגוונים. אך כל זה לא יובחן בקריאה ראשונית אלא רק לאחר לימוד מדוקדק. להלן ננסה לאתר ולהציג את מסר המחבר מן הרמזים המפוזרים במגילה.

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