

Purim Insights – February 2023

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B'chol Yom v'Yom – Consistency in daily practice pays off

In 1902, the Sfas Emes explored the significance of daily consistency in Jewish practice on the verse in the Megillah of “*bchol yom vayom Mordechai mit-halech*” (every day Mordechai would go to the gates of the palace to ask about how Esther was doing).

It would appear, he says, that all the events described in the Megillah drive towards to upcoming miracle that was to occur on behalf of the Jewish people. This was not a small matter as the time between the ascension of Esther to her position in the kingdom and the events of Haman's plot to exterminate the Jewish people might have been a couple of years.

Nevertheless, Mordechai HaTzaddik faithfully and consistently went every day to the gates of the palace and inquired as to the situation of Esther, especially as she was all alone in the world in terms of her own family (she was an orphan) and here she was in a non-Jewish, alien environment.

So, in the merit of Mordechai's consistent and regular *gemilut chessed* in visiting her every day, the Jewish people merited the miracle of Purim. Mordechai's persistence in refusing to bow down to Haman every day that he showed up at the palace increasingly infuriated Haman. Yet, Mordechai's persistence in visiting Esther led to the victory of the Jews over Haman and his nefarious plans.

So, should we all focus, every day, on our *Avodat HaShem* (service to HaShem) so that we too, in our lives, will continue to draw closer to God and the Torah.

Kimu v'kiblu – Take the open road

The Megillah tells us that the Jewish people once again accepted upon themselves (*kimu v'kiblu alayhem*) the Torah after experiencing the miracle of being saved from almost certain destruction at the hands of Amalek.

Thus, Purim is another Holy Day in which we personally experience *Kabalat HaTorah* (receiving the Torah). Just as the Jewish people had to experience the awesome terror of Amalek's attack on their way out of *Miyzrayim* to reach *Har Sinai* for the giving of the Torah, so did the Jews who lived “*bchol medinos ha-melech*” (all throughout the kingdom of Achashvayrosh) have to experience the terror of potential annihilation by Haman (another instantiation of Amalek) to return to the Torah and its way of life.

We should always strive to come to Torah from an approach of positivity and desire rather than be prompted to return by negative experiences and feeling forced. The road is open to us and we need to look for those opportunities as they present themselves. The better we prepare for those moments, the more likely the success in reaching our spiritual objectives.

HaMelech – The King is always near

The Midrash Rabbah teaches that anywhere in the Megillah where the phrase “*HaMelech Achashvayrosh*” is used, the word *Melech* only refers to the king himself. However, anywhere the word *HaMelech* is used by itself, it refers both to Achashvayrosh and HaShem.

So, at the turning point of the Megillah in Chapter 6, the text reads “*Balie-la hahu nadedu shnas HaMelech*”.

The Midrash explains that the angels, as it were, *nadedu*, rocked the throne of HaShem as they saw that the Jews were in deep trouble. Asks the Midrash, but based on the verse in *Tehillim* – *hinay lo yanum vlo yishan* – does HaShem ever sleep? Well, another verse in *Tehillim* teaches that when the Jewish people are in trouble and the rest of the world is at peace – the verse cries out “*oorah, lama tishan hashem* (Wake up! Why does the King slumber?).

And – the sleep of Achashvayrosh was rocked. Why? He had a dream that Haman was drawing a sword to kill him, and it so agitated him that he abruptly woke. The King calls his butlers and asks them to read him something from the palace archives. By no coincidence they inform him about how Mordechai overheard the plot of *Bigtana* and *Seresh* to kill him. When the King wants to grab someone from his staff to reward Mordechai for his action on behalf of the King’s life, he asks “who is nearby” and his butlers tell him “Haman is standing nearby already” (it’s the near-dawn – what’s he doing there?). Thinks the King – my dream must have been true that Haman was readying to assassinate me. He is just waiting outside my door in the wee hours of the morning. The King decides to let some time play out to know with certainty of Haman’s intentions and, from that point in the Megillah onwards, the narrative follows his downfall.

The takeaway for us may be that every event that we experience has *Hashgacha Pratit* (Divine Providence) behind it. We must have our spiritual antennae attuned to the right frequency. As we approach the Chag of Purim, let’s refocus and tune in to see that influence of HaShem all around us.

Mordechai: The power of a name

The Megillah tells us in *Perek Bet* at the *Bigtana* and *Seresh* plot: וַתֹּאמֶר אֶסְתֵּר לְמֶלֶךְ בְּשֵׁם מֹרְדֵכָי: that Esther spoke to the King **in the name of Mordechai**: *B’shem* Mordechai. What is special about his name? In *Parashat Ki Tisa*, the Torah tells Moshe to take first-rate spices followed by **Mar Dror** – solidified myrrh (a gum resin from a small thorny tree from genus *Commiphora*). The Gemara explains that this phrase ‘*Mar Dror*’ is an allusion to the name Mordechai in the Torah as ‘*Mar Dror*’ in biblical Hebrew becomes ‘*Mari Dechi*’ in Aramaic – hence Mordechai. Adds the Radomsker Rebbe – this will help us explain the verse in Chapter 4 of the Megillah that, when Mordechai heard the news of Haman’s approved plan to destroy the Jewish people, he cried out with a וַיִּצְעֻקָה גְדֻלָּהּ וּמְרָהּ. The letters of the word *U’Mara* are *Vav*, *Mem*, *Reish*, and *Hey*. The middle letters *Mem* (40) and *Reish* (200) are equivalent in *Gematria* (numerical value) to the word Amalek (also 240 in *gematria*). God is represented by the two outer letters of *U’Mara*, the *Vav* and *Hey*, two of the letters of God’s 4-letter name. Amalek wanted to separate the Jewish people from God (by destroying them) – But the word *Dror* in the phrase *Mar Dror* also means freedom (see the Liberty Bell inscription). So, Mordechai was the *Tzaddik* who, through his

righteousness, piety, and prayer could push away Mar – also meaning bitter and representing Amalek. Mordechai had the power to reunite the first and last letter of *U'Mara* to bring honor to God's name and to God's people. May Mordechai's example empower us!

Memory and Action

External stimuli often bring up memories and those memories can spur one to act. In the case of Purim, the Megillah writes in *Perek Tet*: וְהַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה נִזְכָּרִים וְנַעֲשִׂים, that these days of Purim are recalled and performed. The *Sfat Emet*, speaking in 1900, explains that through the remembrance brought about by the reading of the Megillah (and the accompanying action *Mitzvot* of *Matanot L'Evyonim* and *Mishloach Manot*), the enduring power of the miracle that was wrought for our Jewish people is re-highlighted. This is suggested by the earlier verse: לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם יָמֵי מִשְׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה = to make these days ones of celebration and joy. It is via our focused experience of the special *Mitzvot* of Purim that the day is transformed into a celebration of salvation and the palpable sense of God's providential power. Any *Mitzvah* that is accepted B'Simcha continues to be celebrated each time B'Simcha. So, it is for Purim. And so, it is for us every day of the year. To the extent that we accept each day we are given *B'Simcha L'Shaym Avodas HaBoreh*, so are our days illuminated and enhanced.

What does it mean to be a Yehudi?

As we look through the Megillah at how the Jewish people are described, doesn't it strike you as odd that the familiar term *Bnay Yisrael* is never utilized? Instead, we are described as *Yehudim*. What is extraordinarily special about the name Yehuda that, for the purposes of the entire Purim story, the term *Yisrael* cannot suffice? Perhaps one way to look at the difference is to understand the nature of how each name came to be. Yaakov, due to fighting with the Angel and emerging victorious, is renamed to Yisrael - כִּי־שָׁרִיתָ עִם־אֱלֹהִים וְעַם־אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּוַּכַּל - "For you have fought with beings of Divine origin and with human beings and you prevailed." That kind of term for describing the Jews of the Purim period just doesn't align. We were about to be victims and the Elohim in the verse connotes God's aspect of strict judgement.

However, when Leah, the wife who felt forgotten, even spurned, by Yaakov has her children, she names her fourth child Yehuda with the symbolism of הַפֶּעַם אֹדָה אֶת־יְהוָה. "Now, I will express my gratitude to HaShem". How much more apt is this word for describing us in the time of Achashvayyros! The Megillah wants us to notice that our national essence was characterized as one of gratitude for the miracle that saved us. And the name Yehuda contains the four letters of YHVH, representing God's attribute of kindness. We are truly *Yehudim* in the Megilla and, to this very day, we call ourselves "Jews", short for "Jew-deans".

“Ad d’lo yada” – Really?

We are all familiar in one way or another with the phrase from the Gemara in Megilla on Daf Zayin - אָמַר רַבָּא: מִיִּיב אֵינִישׁ לְבִסּוּמֵי בְּפוּרֵיָא עַד דְּלֵא יָדַע בֵּין אָרוּר הָמָן לְכְרוּךְ מֶרְדֵּכַי. Says Rava, “A person is obligated to become sufficiently intoxicated with wine on Purim so that he or she does not know how to differentiate between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordechai’.” We all know that this Halacha cannot possibly mean that we get ourselves “stinking drunk” on Purim for two reasons.

(1) it is never advisable for a Jewish person to lose control of their decision-making capability especially in the middle of a Yom Tov, and

(2) becoming what would equate to a “*Shoteh*”, meaning an individual behaving “out-of-control”, would immediately transition you from remaining obligated in the *Mitzvot* of Purim to becoming “*Patur*” from all *Mitzvot*.

So, what can this phrase be getting at? R. Moshe Sternbuch in his *Likutim* on *Moadim U’zmanim HaShalem, Chelek Vuv*, quotes R. Yisrael Salanter, in his *Sefer Emek Bracha*, as offering the following comment. “*Ad delo yada*” is not a *shiur* or measurer in the *kiyyum Hamitzvah* (our fulfillment of the *Mitzvot* of the day) but rather a *shiur* in when one would become *Patur min HaMitzvah* (no longer obligated to fulfill any *Mitzvah*).

Accordingly, we are responsible to know when the amount of wine that we have consumed on Purim begins to affect our normal pattern of conversation, energy, and composure. Once reaching that point, we have fulfilled Rava’s dictum, and we now continue our celebration of the day *B’Mishteh v’Simcha*.