

YOUNG ISRAEL OF HEWLETT  
CONGREGATION AHAVAT YISRAEL

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# PERSPECTIVES

Purim 5770/2010



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# PERSPECTIVES

**Purim 5770/2010**

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NANCY MEZRAHI, IN LOVING AND BLESSED MEMORY OF HER PARENTS,  
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## Introduction

*Hakarat hatov* (gratitude) to *Hashem*, and the Rabbi of the Young Israel of Hewlett, Rabbi Heshy Blumstein, and especially to those whose financial support made this work possible, are intrinsic to the success of any religious endeavor. As such, it is with great appreciation that we recognize those efforts and contributions which created this edition of the Purim 'Perspectives' Journal.

Indeed, recognition is especially expressed to those renowned Torah scholars who donated of their time and vast knowledge to offer their words of Torah wisdom on the subject of Purim: Rabbi J. Simcha Cohen, Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky and Rabbi Shalom Hammer.

*Kabbalat haTorah* represents the acceptance of Torah by *Klal Yisrael* on Sinai. Indeed, in the era of Purim, tradition has it, that the Jews again accepted the Torah. However, on this second acceptance of the Torah during the time of Purim, the rabbis state that the acceptance achieved on Purim was greater than that accomplished at Sinai. On Sinai the Jewish people were coerced to accept the Torah, whereas during the time of Purim, the Jewish people accepted the Torah out of love for G-d.

“Said Rava... they re-accepted it [the Torah] in the days of Achashveirosh, for it is written, ‘[the Jews] confirmed, and took upon themselves,’ they confirmed what they had accepted long before [קִיְמוּ וּקְבְלוּ הַיְהוּדִים קִיְמוּ מֵהַ שְׁקִבְלוּ כְּבָר].” Rashi explains that in the days of Purim, the nation of Israel re-accepted the Torah out of love of G-d for the miracle that He performed for the nation.<sup>1</sup>

Each Jewish holiday Jews reassert their allegiance to *Hashem* through proper ritual and especially through the study of Torah which is tantamount to receiving it anew, each time one learns. This Purim volume of the Young Israel of Hewlett's Torah Journal, 'Perspectives,' constitutes our *shul's* reaffirmation and commitment to Torah study.

Indeed, without the symbiotic relationship that exists between those purveyors of Torah and those furnishing monetary succor towards the loftiest of Jewish goals: *Talmud Torah*, the very cement that binds the Jewish community could not exist. The coexistence between Torah and *Tzedakah* and/or support for Torah, is the lifeblood of Jewish communal living.

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<sup>1</sup> Esther 9:27. And see, Tr. Shabbat 88a, and Rashi thereat.

Within these pages, Torah can once again be learned, again and again—because it is written—by those whose Torah we have all benefited from; whether by their *divrei* Torah, *shiurim*, sermons, lectures or even their books discussed on a daily and weekly basis.

{*Rabbi Judah Z. Cohen, Esq.*}

# The Heroism of Queen Esther

By: Rabbi Heshy Blumstein<sup>1</sup>

Relating the following incident, the Midrash<sup>2</sup> states that while Rabbi Akiva was in the midst of delivering a *shiur*, he noticed his students not being attentive and starting to fall asleep. In an effort to arouse them, he asked them the following interesting question: “can anyone please explain in what *zechut* did Queen Esther merit to rule 127 lands?” Answering his own question, Rabbi Akiva explained that because of the merits of Queen Esther’s great-great-grandmother Sarah *Imainu*, who lived for 127 years, Queen Esther merited to rule 127 countries.

Rabbi Akiva’s answer calls for an explanation. What do the years of Sarah’s life have to do with the amount of lands that Queen Esther ruled? What is the lesson hidden in this question? What lesson did Rabbi Akiva want to teach his slumbering students with this question and answer? Furthermore, Rav Eliyahu Dessler, in his monumental work *Michtav Me-Eliyahu*,<sup>3</sup> asks: Are we really to believe that the students of Rabbi Akiva were sleeping in the middle of his *shiur*. The students of Rabbi Akiva were great spiritual leaders and it would be disturbing to believe that they all fell asleep in the middle of his lecture. To properly understand this Midrash, we must explore in depth the relationship that Sarah *Imainu* had with Queen Esther. We will explore three areas that they had in common: (i) The world of sacrifice; (ii) The world of judgment; and (iii) The world of inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

## I. The World of Sacrifice

The Midrash relates that Haman drew lots in order to determine in which month would it be best to destroy *Am Yisrael*. The month of Nissan could not work. Nissan had the merit of Pesach. The month of Cheshvan could not work, because it had the merit of Sarah *Imeinu* who passed-on in that

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<sup>1</sup> Rav, Young Israel of Hewlett, Congregation Ahavat Yisrael.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis Rabbah 58:3.

<sup>3</sup> *Michtav Me’Eliyahu*, Strive for Truth, Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, translation by Aryeh Carmel, Vol. 3:25.

<sup>4</sup> Artscroll—Purim, ‘Purim—Its Observance and Significance/A Pre-Sensation Based on Talmudic and Traditional Sources’ pg. 40, s.v.: ‘One hundred and twenty-seven provinces.’

month. However, Adar worked for Haman, even though Moshe *Rabbeinu* passed away in that month. And yet, why would the death of Moshe *Rabbeinu* symbolize an opportunity to bring about the downfall of Israel while the month of Cheshvan was overruled because it contained the death of Sarah? Why would Sarah's death bring merit to the Jewish people while Moshe's death would help contribute to Jewish downfall?<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Zilberstein in his *sefer* *Aleinu Leshabayah*,<sup>6</sup> teaches that the death of Moshe held no advantage for the people of Israel. On the contrary, the *Gemara*<sup>7</sup> teaches that on the day Moshe died, 300 *halachot* were forgotten and 700 doubts arose. Sarah's death was very different. She is a symbol of the readiness to sacrifice for her faith. She is the symbol of devotion. As the *Midrash*<sup>8</sup> explains:

Avraham said, 'How will I get my son to part from his mother? She will never allow me to bring Yitzchak as an offering before G-d.' He went to the tent of Sarah and said: 'Our son Yitzchak has grown and has not yet learnt the service of *Hashem*. I will bring him to study in the academy of Shem and Ever.' Sarah responded: 'Of course, you speak well.' And then Sarah turned to her son and said: 'My son, how can I part from you, I am old. Who knows if I will ever get to see you again.'

Despite this great difficulty, she parted from her son, knowing full well she might never see him again. This was a sacrifice for the future of *Am Yisrael*. When Haman plotted to harm the Jewish people, he knew the month in which Sarah died as a result of her sacrifice, in allowing Yitzchak to leave, was not one in which he would be able to carry-out his evil decree. Sarah's sacrifice would protect the Jews—her descendents—from all who wish to harm them."<sup>9</sup>

Esther parallels, and in some way exceeds, the sacrifice of Sarah.

The poignancy of Esther's plight is almost certainly the most gripping part of the *Megillah* in purely personal terms. A Jewish girl hoping against hope not to become first lady of the world finds herself spending twelve months in an alien harem dedicated to the sole purpose of preparing for the king's pleasure.

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Yitzchok Zilberstein, *Aleinu L'shabei'ach*, pgs. 276-277.

<sup>6</sup> *Aleinu L'shabei'ach*, quoting, *Pri Haaretz*, vol. 2 pg. 448.

<sup>7</sup> Tr. Temurah 16a.

<sup>8</sup> *Yalkut Shimeoni* 22:98.

<sup>9</sup> *Aleinu L'shabei'ach*, pgs. 276-277.

According to our Sages, however, the personal suffering of Esther was even more acute. “Mordechai took her to himself like a daughter. Do not read like a daughter, but like a ‘home’ [meaning a wife].” Thus we have a married Jewess—who remained married to Mordechai all through her ordeal in the palace—simultaneously living with a gentile husband.<sup>10</sup>

The readiness to sacrifice is something Sarah and Esther implanted in their children and grandchildren to this very day. Note the similarity between the events in Esther’s life and in Sarah’s life. Sarah was willing to sacrifice her life in the story of Sarah and Avimelech in order to save the life of her husband for the future of *Am Yisrael*. Perhaps, based on this analysis, we can have an understanding of what Rabbi Akiva was trying to teach his students. Rabbi Akiva was saying; arise from your slumber because in order to study Torah, sacrifice is needed. Look at our great-grandmothers, Sarah and Esther, and you my dear students, will learn what it means to sacrifice.

## II. The World of Judgment

In *Parshat Vayera* the *pasuk* states: “And Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh....’”<sup>11</sup> The Torah teaches that upon hearing the *Malàch* (angel) tell Avraham that Sarah will give birth to a son, Sarah laughed, saying, ‘Shall I bear in truth a child, though I am aged.’<sup>12</sup> Hashem accused Sarah in Avraham’s presence of not believing in his miracles. Sarah denied those accusations. How could we possibly understand this story? How could our great matriarch Sarah be capable of believing that G-d could not grant her a child. Why did she laugh? Rabbi Yochanan Zweig answers with the following explanation:

*Chazal* teaches us that Sarah’s life was governed by *Midat Hadin*—the attribute of Justice. The only expectations that she had from Hashem were those that she had earned. And as such, the birth of Yitzchak through miraculous means was contrary to her whole outlook on life. Consequently as much as she desired to have a child, she could not believe that the information was true. Sarah was torn between two emotions—her overwhelming desires to become a

<sup>10</sup> Artscroll—The Megillah, ‘Esther—A Forlorn Wife,’ pg. xxxi.

<sup>11</sup> Genesis 18:15.

<sup>12</sup> Rashi, Genesis 18:12, s.v.: ‘*Biqirbah*,’ and also see, Rashi, Genesis 18:13 s.v.: ‘*Ha’af umnam*.’

mother, and her fear that the message was not true. Her laughter was an expression of that fear, that since this cannot be possible, it must be a mistake. However, since at the same time she was experiencing a strong desire for this information to be true, she identified the laughter as an expression of joy rather than one of denial. She was not aware that she was being untruthful when denying that her laughter signified a lack of belief.<sup>13</sup>

Esther too was an instrument of *Din*, as the Artscroll Commentary explains:

As soon as Saul was anointed king of Israel, he was commanded to wage war against Amelek. ... Saul righteous Saul, fell into the trap that would cost him his throne; He substituted his own concept of mercy for G-d's. He thought he would be more merciful than the merciful G-d! He attacked Amelek and a victory took place, but not a total victory—the people and Saul found the commandment more than they could fulfill. One man, above all, was spared. He was King Agag, malevolent and obsequious ruler of the evil nation. Because he was spared, he lived with his wife and she conceived. She survived and gave birth. Many generations later, a descendent of Agag, born because of Saul's misplaced mercy, entered the stage of Jewish History. His name was Haman. And, because of an act of human 'mercy' in opposing G-d's absolute and ultimate mercy, the Jewish people were threatened with the same extinction that should have visited upon Amelek.<sup>14</sup>

G-d in His mysterious ways allowed the descendants of Saul, Esther and Mordechai, to be the instruments of *Din* and rectify the mistakes of their illustrious grandfather. Esther's own name testifies to the attribute of *Din*. The Gemara<sup>15</sup> asks: Where is there an allusion to the name Esther in the Torah? The Gemara answers by quoting a *pasuk* from *Sefer Devarim*: "And I will hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they have committed, when they turned to other deities."<sup>16</sup> The commentaries explain that in the days of Esther there will be a concealment of the Divine countenance. *Din* is often synonymous with the concealment of divine providence. Esther is therefore the epitome of *Midat Hadin*, like her great-grandmother Sarah. The Midrash expands on this idea, by stating:

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<sup>13</sup> Rabbi Yochanan Zweig, Insights 1, written by Rabbi M. Shifman.

<sup>14</sup> Artscroll—The Megillah, pgs. xxviii-xxix 'Saul and Agag.'

<sup>15</sup> Tr. Chulim 139a.

<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 31:18.

My G-d, My G-d, why have You forsaken me. My Lord, at the splitting of the Sea, my Lord at Sinai, why have You forsaken me? Why has the order of the world changed concerning me, the order of the mothers? With regards to our mother Sarah, she was held captive by Pharaoh for one night, and his household was struck with a plague. But I have been placed in the bosom of this wicked man all these years, and for me You do no miracles? My G-d, My G-d, why have You forsaken me?<sup>17</sup>

Esther is firmly entrenched in the world of *Din* and has difficulty understanding why her hero, Sarah, did not suffer the way she had to. The only way for her to accept her plight and survive, is to understand that sometimes the Divine conceals its presence during periods of *Din*. Hence Esther's name reflects *hester*—concealment.

### III. The World of Inspiration

The Chiddushei Harim explains that the years of the life of Sarah *Imeinu* were so blessed and so well utilized that their influence reached across generations to help her descendant Esther. This is reflected in the total number of countries that she ruled. For every year of Sarah's life, Esther merited to rule another country. Each breathing moment of Sarah's life added to Esther's kingdom. Based on this Chiddushei Harim, we can understand perhaps another message that Rabbi Akiva was teaching his students. Rabbi Akiva wanted to teach his students how much blessing could flow from every moment.<sup>18</sup>

But were Rabbi Akiva's students really sleeping during his *shiur*? Michtav Me-Eliyahu<sup>19</sup> suggests that Rabbi Akiva's *shiur* was discussing lofty topics reaching into the high spirits of heaven. The students believed that they were not ready to understand these topics and certainly not ready to live on this holy level of *kedusha*. Therefore, they slept, as if to show Rabbi Akiva, they did not feel as if they could be involved in these discussions; the discussion was beyond them. Rabbi Akiva wanted to teach them that only by studying these lofty concepts can we actually live by these concepts. Rabbi Akiva taught them that

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<sup>17</sup> Midrash Tehillim, Buber edition 22:16. And see, Artscroll—Purim, 'Purim—Its Observance and Significance/A Pre-Sensation Based on Talmudic and Traditional Sources' pg. 40, s.v.: 'One hundred and twenty-seven provinces.'

<sup>18</sup> Aleinu L'shabei'ach, pgs. 276-277.

<sup>19</sup> Michtav Me'Eliyahu, Strive for Truth, Rabbi Eliyahu E. Dessler, translation by Aryeh Carmel, Volume 3:25.

the only way Esther could survive her ordeals was if she studied, moment to moment, the life of her great-grandmother Sarah *Imeinu*. The only way Esther could have reached her level of *Ruach haKodesh* was because of the great level of *Ruach haKodesh* that Sarah *Imeinu* possessed. This message had to be clearly taught to the students of Rabbi Akiva for them to be able to reach the high levels that they were expected to attain.

In conclusion, several other parallels connect Sarah and Esther; their beauty, their modesty and even their charm. For example *Chazal* compare the high level of modesty of Sarah with the amazing level of modesty that Esther displayed living in the home of the gentile king Achashverosh. We are shown that Esther drew her inspiration from the life of Sarah, her personal role model. We too must study and respect the lives of our ancestors if we hope to draw inspiration. *Chazal* teach us '*maaseh avot siman labanim*'—the deeds of our fathers are pathways for their children. May we merit to be called their children.



# The Joy of Purim and the Love of G-d

By: Rabbi Richard Borah

Maimonides, in his great work the Mishneh Torah,<sup>1</sup> states that a person is obligated to make a *suedah* according to their means (“אשר תמצא ידו”), and to give two types of food to one friend (“משלוח מנות”). Maimonides follows this law with a description of the obligation to give to the poor on Purim. He states:

[A]nd one is obligated to give to the poor on the day of Purim. No less than two poor people. Give to each one a gift, or type of prepared food (“תבשיל”) or type of food (“אוכלין”).<sup>2</sup>

Maimonides continues in the next *halacha*:

It is better for a person to increase gifts to the poor (“במתנות אביונים”) rather than to increase the *suedah* or the *m’shloach manot* because there is no greater or more glorious joy than to bring joy to the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widow and the converts. To bring joy to these people in misery is similar to the *Shechinah* as it states: “To revive the spirit of the fallen and to revive the heart of the crushed.”<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Yosef Dov Ber Soloveitchik (“the Rav”), in *sefer Harerei Kedem*, comments on this series of laws in the Mishneh Torah, and raises some interesting questions:

This concept that the giving of *matanot l’evyonim* is a great and glorious joy requires study, but [also] what is the concept [that would explain Maimonides’ statement] regarding *matanot l’evyonim* in saying that *matanot l’evyonim* is greater than any *mitzvah* of Purim? ... It is surprising [that Maimonides states] the *mitzvah* of *matanot l’evyonim* is greater than the other *mitzvot* of the day: greater than *m’shloach manot*, greater than the *suedah* and greater than the reading of the Megillah! What is the reason that *matanot l’evyonim* is a greater and more glorious *mitzvah*?<sup>4</sup>

It seems the Rav is troubled by two ideas:

<sup>1</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah 2:15.

<sup>2</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah 2:16.

<sup>3</sup> Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Megillah 2:17, quoting Isaiah 50:7.

<sup>4</sup> Harerei Kedem, Vol.1§206.

(1) Why does one even compare ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’ to the other ‘*mitzvot*’ of Purim as if they are on some type of scale of importance? Usually, each ‘*mitzvah*’ stands on its own and is not compared in terms of greatness with other ‘*mitzvot*.’

(2) If you are going to ‘rate’ the Purim ‘*mitzvot*,’ why is ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’ the greatest of them? And why does it constitute the “greatest joy” of all possible joys, as Maimonides states: “because there is no greater or more glorious joy than to bring joy to the hearts of the poor, the orphans, the widow and the converts.”

The Rav addresses the first question in *sefer* Harerei Kedem by explaining that the two Purim *mitzvot* of giving gifts to the poor (‘*matanot l’evyonim*’) and sending food to friends (‘*m’shloach manot*’), are both parts of the same ‘*mitzvah*’ of joy on Purim (‘*simchat Purim*’). The Rav states:

It seems that an explanation for the Rambam’s words is that ‘*the mitzvot of suedah, m’shloach manot*’ and ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’ are one ‘*mitzvah*’ in essence, included in the ‘*mitzvah*’ of the joy of Purim and that all of them are part of the ‘*mitzvah*’ of the joy of Purim: the ‘*suedah*’ being the core of the ‘*mitzvah*’ to have a joyful drinking party (‘*ha’ mishte v’simcha*’) and also the ‘*mitzvah*’ of the ‘*m’shloach manot*’ is a part of the *mitzvah* of *seudah*. Maimonides shows us this by stating in the beginning of the ‘*halacha*’ describing [the ‘*seudah*’]: “How is the ‘*suedah*’ carried out?” And then Maimonides continues in the description of this ‘*halacha*’ to describe the details of the *suedah* and of ‘*m’shloach manot*.’”<sup>5</sup>

The Rav continues to explain that the ‘*mitzvah*’ of ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’ is also a part of the ‘*mitzvah*’ of the ‘*simcha*’ of Purim, similar to the ‘*mitzvot*’ of ‘*suedah*’ and ‘*m’shloach manot*.’ This giving of gifts of money and food to the poor is not simply a form of ‘*tzeddakah*’: it is a part of the ‘*simcha*’ of Purim, similar to the ‘*suedah*’ and ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’. This giving brings a profound addition to the ‘*simcha*’ of Purim and is of the highest value and the greater enjoyment to the person. The Rav explains,

Also ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’ is for the sake of ‘*simchat Purim*’ [as Maimonides states] “there is no greater or more glorious joy than bringing joy to the poor” ...for the ‘*mitzvah*’ is to bring joy to oneself and to others with him, and for this reason it is written that

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<sup>5</sup> Id.

the ‘*mitzvah*’ of ‘*matanot l’evyonim*’ is greater than all the others “since there is no greater joy than the joy of bringing joy to the hearts of the poor...”.<sup>6</sup>

The Rav goes on to refer to Maimonides’ statement in *Hilchot Yom Tov*,<sup>7</sup> that when a person eats and drinks (to partake in the ‘*simcha*’ of a ‘*Yom Tov*’), he is obligated to provide for the convert, the orphan and the widow and the other downtrodden people, “for one who only concerns himself with the needs of his family; this is not a ‘feast of *mitzvah*,’ but a ‘*suedat krisoe*’ (“a feast of the belly”). The Rav brings other examples to show that it is the “Jewish standard,” that whenever a designated celebration or offering is partaken of by an individual or a family, there is a requirement to reach out to the unfortunate and struggling members of the Jewish community and invite them to join in the festivities. The statements of Maimonides about the ‘*seudah*’ of Purim certainly are consistent with this idea. However, there is a unique quality that distinguishes the Purim inclusion of the poor and unfortunate in the joy of Purim, from the inclusion of the poor in the other ‘*yom tov*’ feasts.<sup>8</sup> The difference is that on Purim this act of kindness is not simply an obligation or an act of justice, it is an act that brings the greatest joy. This inclusion of the poor in the feast has the status of being a key component in the obligatory ‘*simcha*’ of Purim; and as Maimonides explains it, the greatest of the joys of Purim and perhaps the greatest of all joys. This joy of giving to the unfortunate members of *Klal Yisrael* needs to be explained. Few would describe the act of giving to the poor as their ‘greatest joy.’ Although the Jew is by nature and training, compassionate and empathizes with the suffering of his fellow Jew, for the most part, ‘*tzeddakah*’ is seen as an act of kindness, of justice and an obligation. It is not the first thing one thinks of when reflecting on the greatest source of joy of the Purim experience or, for that matter, the greatest of all life’s joys.

So how can we explain this great joy that results from “*matanot l’evyonim*”? How can we understand it and experience it? Maimonides expresses an idea that may be the key to understanding this phenomenon. The Mishneh Torah’s description of this *halacha*,<sup>9</sup> states that “to bring joy to the heart of these unfortunate people (האמללים), is similar to the Divine Presence (דומה לשכינה), as it says, “to revive the spirit of the fallen and to revive the hearts of the

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<sup>6</sup> Id.

<sup>7</sup> Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Yom Tov* 6:17-18.

<sup>8</sup> Id., and see, *Hilchot Chagigah* 1:11-12.

<sup>9</sup> *Supra*, at fn. 3.

crushed.”<sup>10</sup> We know that there is a directive in the Torah, ‘הלכת בדרכיו’ to walk in the ways of G-d, to imitate His “ways,” as we see them expressed through G-d’s intervention in the world. As He is just, we should be just. As He is merciful and slow to anger, we should strive to do likewise. Maimonides’ term, ‘דומה לשכינה,’ is consistent with this idea. But what does imitating the ways of G-d have to do with great joy?

## What is Joy?

Why is acting in a manner ‘*domeh l’Shechinah*’ such a profound joy to the person? Why does it exceed all other joys of life as Maimonides states in the laws of Megillah, ‘שאין שם שמחה גדולה ומפוארה’ “there is no greater or more glorious joy ...”? Let us begin by analyzing what joy is. All normal people strive to have joy in their lives. The pursuit and experiencing of joy is something unique to the human being. Joy is different from simple pleasure in that it seems, animals can also experience. Pleasure is a physical experience associated with the sensual responses such as taste, smell, touch, and feel. But joy is an experience of the personality that brings fulfillment in a different way. Although it is often associated with physical pleasure, it certainly does not have to be. It is possible that great joy can come with great pain (giving birth and completing a marathon comes to mind). Finding out that others have succeeded (or failed), that can bring great joy, although there is no sensual response. What is at the core of all these joyous experiences?

The human being is unique among living things in that he or she has the ability to place value on things. This valuing of things is highly individualistic. Some people value being clean and neat so highly, that they get a huge rush of joy when their house is ‘spic and span.’ Some people value wealth so highly that they experience great joy in obtaining riches even under the most unjust and cruel of circumstances. Some value beauty so highly that they would joyously give up all other pleasures to obtain it. In this way, the human is very different from any other being. Most dogs, cats, horses and birds of a species have very similar pleasures and pursue very predictable courses of action. Humans however, have a great deal of variety in what they value, and therefore in the joys they pursue. Joy occurs when a person experiences the realization of something they highly value, whether it includes pain, pleasure or neither of these. The degree of the event’s value to the person, determines the intensity of the joy.

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 47:15.

Conversely, the experiencing of something of low or no value results in boredom or indifference. The experiencing of something that lessens or destroys something we value is experienced as anguish, sadness or despair (the opposite of joy).

If we explain joy as the experiencing of something of value to a person, and “great joy,” as the experiencing of something of great value to the person, the question now before us is: ‘How is a person’s acting in a manner ‘similar to the Divine Presence’ (‘דומה לשכינה’) in helping the poor, unfortunate people of Israel, be something of such high personal value that its joy would exceed all of his or her other joys?

### **What is Acting Similar to the “Shechinah”?**

The next step in understanding the relationship of acting ‘דומה לשכינה’ to great joy is to understand what it means to act in a way “similar to the *Shechinah*”. The concept that man can imitate the ways of G-d is very difficult, philosophically. The root concept and belief of Judaism is expressed in the ‘*Shema*’ in which we affirm that, “G-d is one.” This does not simply mean that G-d is singular (i.e., that there is not more than one G-d). “G-d is one,” describes, according to Maimonides, is that G-d is an absolute unity without parts or characteristics. Maimonides states in his Thirteen Principles of Faith:

[G-d], the Cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair, nor one like a species [which encompasses many individuals], nor one as in an object that is made up of many elements, nor as a single simple object that is infinitely divisible. Rather, G-d is a unity unlike any other possible unity.<sup>11</sup>

Maimonides makes clear, in many works including, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, that it is blasphemous to conceive of G-d as possessing of a body, of emotions or even of possessing knowledge. These characteristics would be ‘parts of G-d,’ and would violate the concept of a perfect unity. This absolute unity of G-d is therefore, according to Maimonides, unknowable to the human mind. If this is the case, we have a great difficulty understanding the idea of acting ‘דומה לשכינה’. When we are merciful we are not imitating G-d’s mercy, since for us, mercy is a “trait” that we possess, but when G-d acts in the world in a way that to us appears as His acting from a trait of “mercy,” it is really a result of His unity and definitely not the result of a separate trait of mercy.

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<sup>11</sup> Rambam, Thirteen Principles of Faith.

This problem has been addressed by Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, when it explains the human-like descriptions of G-d found in the Torah. Maimonides explains this by clarifying that when the Torah states that G-d is acting with mercy or some other trait, it does not mean that G-d possesses that trait, but that His actions take a form that appears to us, from our human perspective, as resulting from G-d's mercy or some other trait.

So what we must say is that when the actions of G-d are imitated by man, although the actions of G-d are not the result of a trait of mercy, (as G-d has no traits), the imitation of these actions by man will instill and reinforce desirable human traits within the person. We imitate G-d's actions, not G-d's traits (since He has no traits), and as a result, we develop desirable human traits such as justice, mercy, kindness, patience, etc....

This analysis has now taken another step. In the first step we clarified the roots of "joy" as being distinct from pleasure and connected it to the occurrence of something of high value to the person. We then clarified the concept of 'דומה לשכינה' explaining that this is the imitation of G-d's actions which creates excellent traits in the human being. But to address our original inquiry, we still need to answer the key question: How does this acting '*domeh l'Shechinah*,' bring about great joy in the person?

### **Which Person Values Acting "Domeh L'Shechinah" Above All Things?**

We can now state our question as follows: Why is acting in a manner similar to G-d's acts, of the highest value to a person? To address this final step in answering our question, I would like to narrow and restate the question as follows: Under what conditions is acting in a manner similar to G-d's acts, of the highest value to the person?

This restating of the question is key, in my opinion, because it is certainly not true that for all people (Jewish or not Jewish), in all circumstances, acting in a manner similar to G-d's acts, is of the highest value (and therefore greatest joy), to the person. For most people, there are many other things of much higher value. Who is the person who values acting in a manner similar to G-d's acts as the highest value? I would like to suggest that there is only one type of person that will place acting 'דומה לשכינה' at the pinnacle of value: This person is the 'אוהב ה' ('the lover of G-d').

## What is of the Highest Value to the “Ohaiv Hashem”?

The ‘אוהב ה’ the lover of G-d, has a continual desire to draw close to the Creator. This concept of approaching the Creator is also difficult to understand. What is this experience; Maimonides describes it in the Mishneh Torah, as follows:

When a person contemplates His wondrous and great deeds and creations and appreciates His infinite wisdom that surpasses all comparison, he will immediately love, praise and glorify [Him], yearning with tremendous desire to know [G-d’s] great name, as David stated: “My soul thirsts for the Lord, for the living G-d.”<sup>12</sup>

The ‘אוהב ה’ seeks at all times to contemplate the greatness of G-d by reflecting on the creation and its wondrous qualities. This person will always strive to be occupied with two things only: (1) increasing his or her knowledge of G-d; and (2) serving G-d according to that knowledge.

Maimonides states in *The Guide for the Perplexed*, regarding this:

David therefore commands his son Solomon these two things and exhorts him earnestly to do them: to acquire a true knowledge of G-d and to be earnest in His service after that knowledge has been acquired. For he says, “And thou, Solomon my son, know thou the G-d of thy father, and serve him with a perfect heart....”<sup>13</sup>

These two activities of increasing knowledge of G-d and serving G-d according to that knowledge are of the highest value and, therefore, the greatest joy to the ‘אוהב ה’ It is through these two activities that the ‘אוהב ה’ deepens his contemplation of G-d which brings him the most joy. Perhaps now, we can explain how the ‘אוהב ה’ serves G-d by raising the spirits of the downtrodden peoples through the *mitzvah* of ‘*matanot l’evyonim*.’

## “Chesed”/Loving-kindness As a Pattern of the Creation

What is of highest value to the ‘*ohav Hashem*,’ is to clarify and deepen his or her contemplation and understanding of G-d. As Maimonides states in many places, the direct conception of G-d’s oneness is not possible for the human mind. His contemplation is focused on the creation of G-d and the

<sup>12</sup> Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* 2:2, quoting Psalms 42:3.

<sup>13</sup> *Guide for the Perplexed*, by Moses Maimonides, Friedländer tr. [1904], Book III, Chapter 51, pg. 386 quoting Chronicles 27:9.

patterns within it. Through study of the creations of the Torah and the world and the practice of the law, this contemplation is deepened and the individual's connection with G-d is strengthened. As Maimonides states in *The Guide for the Perplexed*:

The true worship of G-d is only possible when correct notions of Him have previously been conceived. When you have arrived by way of intellectual research at a knowledge of G-d and His works, then commence to devote yourselves to Him, try to approach Him and strengthen the intellect, which is the link that joins you to Him.<sup>14</sup>

Observance of the '*mitzvot*' are also, for the '*אוהב ה'*, a great means to deepened contemplation of G-d as their performance brings to the mind to reflect on certain aspects of G-d's creation and the forms and patterns within it. As Maimonides states:

We must bear in mind that all such religious acts as reading the Law, praying, and the performance of other precepts, serve exclusively as the means of causing us to occupy and fill our mind with the precepts of G-d, and free it from worldly business; for we are this, as it were, in communication with G-d, and undisturbed by any other thing.<sup>15</sup>

Loving-kindness ('*דחן*'), is a fundamental pattern of G-d's action and the pattern of His creation as He provides for the needs of His creatures. As Maimonides states:

Loving-kindness ('*דחן*') is practiced in two ways: first, we show kindness to those who have no claim to it whatsoever upon us; secondly, we are kind to those to whom it is due, in a greater measure than is due to them. In the prophetic writings the term '*דחן*' occurs mostly in the sense of showing kindness to those who have no claim to it whatsoever. For this reason the term '*דחן*' is employed to express the good bestowed upon us by G-d: "I will mention the loving-kindness of the Lord." On this account, the very act of the creation is an act of G-d's loving-kindness.<sup>16</sup>

We can see that the act of loving-kindness, when performed by a person, not only assists the recipient of this act, but provides for the person performing

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<sup>14</sup> Id., at Book III Chapter 51, pg. 385.

<sup>15</sup> Id., at Book III Chapter 51, pg. 385.

<sup>16</sup> Id., at Book III, Chapter 53, pg. 392, quoting Isaiah 53:7.

the kindness an experience of contemplation and reflection upon this fundamental element of the creation. Specifically, the loving-kindness of G-d for the downtrodden is a fundamental pattern of His creation. Regarding showing 'חסד' towards the vulnerable and struggling peoples, Maimonides states in the Mishneh Torah:

A person is obligated to show great care for orphans and widows because their spirits are very low and their feelings are depressed.... How should one deal with them? One should only speak to them gently and treat them only with honor.... There is a covenant between them and He who spoke and created the world that whenever they cry out because they have been wronged, they will be answered as it states, "When they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry."<sup>17</sup>

Loving a convert who has come to nestle under the wings of the 'Shechinah' fulfills two positive commandments: one, for he is also included among the 'neighbors' whom we are commanded to love; and one because he is a convert and the Torah states, "and you shall love the converts". Thus G-d has commanded us concerning the love of a convert just as He has commanded us concerning loving Himself as it states: "and you shall love G-d, your Lord." The Holy One blessed be He, Himself, loves converts as it states, "and He loves converts."<sup>18</sup>

In imitating this pattern of loving-kindness to the downtrodden, the 'אהרבה ה' more deeply contemplates a fundamental pattern of the creation and draws near to the Creator. Therefore, the assistance of the poor through the 'mitzvah' of 'matanot l'evyonim' is a great joy to the 'אהרבה ה', as it brings him to deeply reflect on the great pattern of loving-kindness that G-d has placed in His creation through the structure of the Torah and of nature, in which He provides for the needs of His creatures.

### **The Connection of Loving-kindness and Matanot L'Evyonim to Purim**

A Jew should always strive to draw closer to G-d through study and practice. This should be every Jew's greatest desire and greatest joy. As we have said, since the practice of taking care of the downtrodden members of 'Klal Yisrael' is a central element in the pattern of G-d's creation (as described in the Torah and through the prophets), it should always be our greatest joy to be

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<sup>17</sup> Rambam, Hilchot De'ot 6:10.

<sup>18</sup> Id., quoting Deuteronomy 10:18.

involved in this activity and by doing so increase our focus and understanding of this key part of G-d's creation, drawing us deeper into contemplation of Him. Unfortunately, this joy of understanding G-d's 'חסד' better, by doing our own 'חסד' (i.e., acting 'דומה לשכינה'), is not always at the pinnacle of our desires. Few have reached the level where the contemplation of G-d's creation and the joy of reflection upon it, fills us with our greatest joy. We are not at the level of 'אורח', lovers of G-d. Perhaps it is because of this lack that the inclusion of the poor and unfortunate people of the 'klal' in our festivities is usually expressed as an obligation, but is not described as our 'greatest joy.' But on Purim it is different.

### **Purim - A Day of Ahavat Hashem for Every Jew**

On Purim, "the veils are lifted." The subtle pattern of G-d's hand in the world is glimpsed, and at least temporarily, the state of mind of the 'אורח' can be experienced by all members of 'Klal Yisrael.' On Purim, something quite unique happened to the Jewish people. The Jewish people of Persia were estranged from Torah and even joined in the debauchery of Achashverosh's drinking festival, in which he grossly misused the vessels taken from the Holy Temple. But when Persia's Jews experienced the unfolding of the Purim drama and how their impending destruction by Haman was "turned on its head" and instead resulted in the destruction of Haman the Amalekite, and the Jews' other would-be exterminators, they glimpsed the "hand of G-d" and were filled with love for their Creator.

Regarding this special quality of Purim, Rabbi Pinchas Stolper writes of his Rebbe, Rav Yitzchok Hutner's (*zt'l*) discussions of why Purim will endure as a holiday after the coming of the Messiah, while the other holidays will cease:

When the night of exile will be banished with the rising sun of the coming Messiah, when in the End of Days the presence of the Hand of G-d will be seen in all its strength and glory, G-d's presence will be so obvious that we will no longer require the "lights" provided by our holidays to enable us to perceive His guiding Hand in historical events. ... There is however, one exception. On Purim, during the long night of exile, the Jewish People developed the special talent to recognize G-d's Providence, even when concealed. This will remain our eternal possession even after the sun of the Redemption will rise.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, 'Purim in A New Light,' pg. 151.

On the day of Purim we all can, to some extent, glimpse the glory of G-d and experience a day of “*ovayd mey ahavah*” “serving G-d through love.” Once this transformation comes over us, we long to get closer to G-d. As Maimonides explains, this is done through the contemplation of His creation and the wondrous patterns within it. By imitating these patterns we draw close to Him. On the day of Purim, this is our greatest desire. On Purim we all long to act ‘דומה לשכינה’—similar to the Divine Presence—to help us draw close to G-d. So when we give to the poor and downtrodden on Purim and our act of loving-kindness resembles the acts of G-d we have our greatest joy. We have drawn close to Him through this great *mitzvah*. Perhaps giving to the poor and reviving their spirits is not our greatest joy on other days. But on this day—a day of love of G-d, of walking with G-d and of imitating G-d to draw close to Him—there is nothing that brings us greater ‘*simcha*.’

We can now explain why Maimonides saw fit to express in the law regarding ‘*matanot l’evyonim*,’ the concept of acting ‘דומה לשכינה’ in performing this ‘*mitzvah*’ and it being our greatest joy. On Purim, when we are transformed to a state of ‘אהבת ה’ similar to the transformation that took place with the Jews of Persia, on this day we long to be close to G-d and to act ‘דומה לשכינה’ by reviving the spirits of the poor and despairing members of ‘*Klal Yisrael*.’ This is the core of our Purim ‘*simcha*’ and our “greatest joy”.

## A Final Note

My Rebbe, Rabbi Yisrael Chait, *shlita*, once mentioned that there is philosophical ‘חסד’ and personal ‘חסד.’ Although, he said, we all want people to be kind to us due to their personal feelings for us; this is not necessarily the best type of ‘חסד’ for either the giver or the receiver. Although it is gratifying to be treated kindly out of personal feelings, when kindness is dependent upon one’s feeling towards another, it is fragile and unpredictable. Love can turn to hate or indifference quickly. The giver can feel unappreciated by the recipient and turn away. The recipient can feel a great debt of personal gratitude, and end up being resentful for owing so much to the giver. Also, when חסד is of the personal kind we tend to help those we can identify with; those people who we share some common bond with. People who have experienced a particular hardship are moved to help those going through a similar hardship. This results in many people in great need, who we do not share a common bond with, being left to their suffering and despair with little assistance. This is not the will of G-d. But, when one acts with חסד towards another, with an eye to being ‘דומה לשכינה’

the giving is not because the recipient is worthy of it, or because the giver expects gratitude or can identify with the recipient. It may not seem as personal but it is, in Rabbi Chait's opinion, a higher quality of 'חסד' for all involved. This philosophical 'חסד' is not cold. It does not mean that the giver does not feel compassion and understanding for the receiver's unfortunate situation. Without this sensitivity the giver of the 'חסד' would not be very effective in helping those in need. What it does mean is that, although these kindly feelings are there, the main motivation for the giving is to act 'דומה לשכינה,' and through this action to draw closer to G-d. This higher motivation should also not be confused with those who look to help the most unfortunate because they are seeking some greater reward from G-d for their good works. This motivation of reward is quite different from the longing to draw close to G-d which motivates the *ohav Hashem*.



# The Relationship Between Mordechai And Esther

By: Rabbi J. Simcha Cohen<sup>1</sup>

Was there a marital relationship between Mordechai and Esther? Rabbinic tradition records nuances that suggest a ‘cover-up’ in the Purim saga. The issue is that the Rabbis contend that Mordechai and Esther had a closer relationship than that of cousins. Talmudic and Midrashic sources note that Mordechai and Esther were married to each other prior to Esther becoming the queen of Persia. This was hidden from King Ahasuerus. Indeed, this marital relationship adds interesting dimensions to the heroics of the Purim story. To uncover the fascinating insights and ramifications of this position, it is necessary to review and analyze original sources and commentaries.

Megillat Esther states the following: “He [Mordechai] brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother, and the girl was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordechai took her for his own daughter (לבת *le’vat*).”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the ArtScroll and JPS translation state that Mordechai adopted her.

The Talmud, however, states in the name of R. Meir that the word לבת *le’vat*, should be read לבית *le’vayit*,” which means “for a house,” and signifies that Mordechai married her.<sup>3</sup> Rashi, commenting on the word *le’vat*, states: “Our rabbis interpreted it to mean *le’vayit*, namely, for a wife.” Rashi does not say that R. Meir contended that Mordechai married Esther. Such a statement would have suggested that this position was not the consensus theory of the Rabbis. The form in which Rashi does report this position, saying “our rabbis,” implies that it was not the view of an individual rabbi, but the general rabbinic position; namely, that Mordechai was married to Esther prior to any involvement with the King of Persia.

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<sup>2</sup> Esther 2:7.

<sup>3</sup> Tr. Megillah 13a.

Several questions arise regarding this interpretation. The first is: Why did the Rabbis decline to accept the simple, literal interpretation of the text—that Mordechai actually adopted Esther? What motivated them to ‘second guess’ the text?

Rav Baruch Epstein, author of the *Torah Temima*, suggests that the phraseology of the text itself counters the obvious, literal translation stating that Mordechai adopted Esther. The Megillah states that Mordechai “took her for his own daughter.” This is an awkward phrase because one does not “take” a person for a daughter. Rather, one “takes” a woman for a wife. [Indeed, the word “take” is an accepted term for marriage, as illustrated in the verse, “*Ki yikach ish ...*”<sup>4</sup>] In addition, the Megillah notes that Esther was beautiful. Such a term is more applicable as a rationale for marriage than as a motivation for adoption. Esther was an orphaned cousin. This was sufficient reason for adoption. To suggest that Mordechai, the great Jewish leader, adopted Esther because of her good looks was strange to the rabbinic mind. Thus, the description of Esther as “fair and beautiful” may have suggested to them that the relationship was not one of adoption, but rather of marriage.

Of concern is why the assumption of a marriage between Mordechai and Esther was presented in the form of an allusion (*remez*) and rabbinic interpretation rather than as an overt statement. If, in fact, Mordechai and Esther were husband and wife, why didn’t the Megillah state this openly? Why was this important fact relegated to Midrashic commentary? One answer is that since the Megillah was written during the reign of Ahasuerus, Mordechai’s marriage to Esther could not have been publicized or overtly noted. Had the king been aware of such a relationship, he probably would have turned against Mordechai and his people. The king would have considered Mordechai’s role devious, treasonous, and deserving of punishment. Accordingly, concealing the marital relationship between Mordechai and Esther was a means of sustaining the royal respect granted to Mordechai and of protecting him from harm.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it is quite evident that there was fear of any public knowledge concerning Mordechai and Esther’s relationship. There are indications that their marital relationship continued even after Esther was crowned queen and married to Ahasuerus. This is evidenced by the statement of Rabbah bar Lima in the name of Rav, that she used to “rise from the lap of Ahasuerus, ritually cleanse, and

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 22:13.

<sup>5</sup> Etz Yaakov commentary on Ein Yaakov, Tr. Megillah 13a.

sit in the lap of Mordechai.<sup>6</sup> The Maharsha comments on this citation that after her forced relations with Ahasuerus, Esther would return to her true husband, Mordechai. Imagine the king's reaction had he been aware of it! If Ahasuerus' anger was such that he ordered Queen Vashti to be eliminated due to an affront to his ego, is there any question whether he would have ordered the death of Mordechai for living with his beloved Queen Esther? However, Esther's relationship with Mordechai ceased when, in an effort to save her people from destruction, she declared that she would approach King Ahasuerus voluntarily.<sup>7</sup> She was well aware that as a result of such an action she would be forever forbidden to Mordechai, her legitimate husband (as she would henceforth no longer be considered an *anusa*, coerced to live with the king).

Tosafot<sup>8</sup> ask why Mordechai did not divorce Esther before she voluntarily went to Ahasuerus, for then he could have remarried her later on. Their response is that a divorce requires witnesses, and Mordechai was afraid that the whole matter would become known. Mordechai was afraid of public exposure. This confirms the rationale for not stating clearly in the Megillah that Mordechai and Esther were husband and wife.

Of interest is the following: Although Megillat Esther concludes with the statement that Mordechai was elevated to the position of second in command to the King (*mishneh la'melech*),<sup>9</sup> the Talmud notes that Mordechai did not spend the rest of his days in Persia. The Mishna<sup>10</sup> lists the names of a number of individuals who were appointed to serve in a leadership capacity in the *Beit Hamikdash*, and Mordechai is mentioned as one of these leaders. This indicates that Mordechai left Persia in order to serve in the Temple in Jerusalem. Why?

What prompted him to go up to the Land of Israel? Perhaps he felt that it was better to be one of the leaders of the returnees of Babylonia to Israel than to be second in command to a gentile king in the *galut*. It is also possible that since he was fearful that his marital relationship with Esther might sooner or later become public knowledge, he decided, once the turmoil against the Jews had subsided, to depart and live far away from the jurisdiction and the power of King Ahasuerus.

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<sup>6</sup> Tr. Megillah 13b.

<sup>7</sup> Tr. Megillah 15a.

<sup>8</sup> Tosafot, Megillah 15a, s.v.: 'Ki'shem.'

<sup>9</sup> Esther 10:3.

<sup>10</sup> Tr. Shekalim 5:1.

The relationship between Mordechai and Esther provides a unique focus on the leadership roles they portrayed in the Purim story. Esther not only married a gentile king in order to save her people but sacrificed her true love in the process. So, another reason for Mordechai's departure from Persia may have been that he could not tolerate seeing his beloved former wife living with another man, even though he was the king.

Thus, while the story of Purim ends well for the Jewish people, it ends tragically for the hero and the heroine, whose personal lives were destroyed.



# Mordechai & Haman—Conflict & Culmination

By: Rabbi Judah Z. Cohen, Esq.

Who was Haman and why his obsession with eradicating the Jewish people over the slight of Mordechai who did not prostrate himself before Haman?

The Talmud queries:<sup>1</sup> What is the source of Haman in the Torah? As the Torah states in the Hebrew: “המֶן הָעֵץ” [*“hamin ha-etz”* “from this tree”], alluding to the Tree in the Garden of Eden.<sup>2</sup> Since Haman was hanged from a tree, and Adam’s sin stemmed from a tree, this correlation represents the source of Haman in the Torah. “Hamin” and “Haman” share the exact same spelling in the Hebrew [המֶן]. Albeit, what further connection exists between Haman and the Tree in the Garden of Eden beyond the mere duplicative spelling of these two words or names?

According to many,<sup>3</sup> Adam and Eve were permitted to enjoy from the entire world, but for one item, the fruit of the Tree. Despite possessing a world in which all things were their own personal, permissible playground, one thing they were not permitted, of which they impermissibly took, which ultimately led to their downfall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Similarly, the entire world, all the peoples within king Ahasuerus’ kingdom—all the Jews—were bowing down to Haman except for one man, Mordechai. It is this individually independent Jew’s defiance and refusal to bow to Haman which kindled his wrath to the point that he desired to commit genocide, for something he could not have or bend to his will. The one thing that escaped Haman, Mordechai’s subservience, eventually led to his fateful demise.

Megillat Esther relates:

After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him. And all the king’s servants, that were in the king’s gate, bowed (כֹּרְעִים), and revered Haman: for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordechai bowed not (לֹא יָכַרַע), nor did him reverence. Then the king’s servants,

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<sup>1</sup> Tr. Chullin 139b.

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 3:11.

<sup>3</sup> Rav Ahron Kotler, Mishnat Rebbe Ahron, s.v.: “*V’chol zeh einenu shava li bakol...*”. My grandfather, Rabbi Yaakov Nayman (zt’l). Rav Chaim Shmuelevits (zt’l) in Sichos Musar. (*Interestingly, all three were contemporaries and friends.*)

which were in the king's gate, said unto Mordechai, Why transgressest thou the king's commandment? ... And when Haman saw that Mordechai bowed not (כרע), nor did him reverence, then was Haman full of wrath. And he thought scorn (ויבו) to lay hands on Mordechai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordechai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordechai.<sup>4</sup>

In order to understand the nature of the dispute between Haman and Mordechai, it is incumbent to define their origins, and genealogy. At the very onset we learn directly from the text of Esther that Haman was a descendent of Agag. Agag<sup>5</sup> was the name of the king of Amalek who King Saul suffered to live when he sallied to destroy the Amalekite nation at the direction of the prophet Shmuel.<sup>6</sup> However, as a result of failing to heed G-d's command to destroy Amalek,<sup>7</sup> the kingdom of Saul was stripped from him,<sup>8</sup> and David was later installed and anointed as King of Israel.

The Midrash states that Haman was called: "בן בנו של קרהו" ["son of the son of Karahu"].<sup>9</sup> The Torah commands: "Remember that which Amalek did to you on your way out of the land of Egypt. How he met thee by the way, and smote the hindmost of thee, even all that were feeble behind thee, when thou was faint and weary; and he feared not G-d."<sup>10</sup> The specific Hebrew words of this verse: "אשר קרד בדרך" [*asher karcha*] ("קרד") are translated to mean, "how he met thee." According to the Rabbis, the words "קרד" [*karcha*] and "קרהו" [*karahu*] are intertwined with the same root derivation meaning: happenstance and chance. The words "קרד" and "קרהו" [*karcha* and *karahu*] are defined as someone who treats all occurrences in the world as mere happenstance and chance, devoid of G-dly providence.<sup>11</sup> Haman was one who believed in chance, in the gamble, in the lottery.

Interestingly, in describing the abdication of the throne of Saul, the Torah relates that Saul's kingdom was literally 'ripped' from him by G-d, as it

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<sup>4</sup> Esther 3:1-6.

<sup>5</sup> Agag is first mentioned in Numbers 24:7.

<sup>6</sup> I Samuel 15:8.

<sup>7</sup> The first command to destroy Amalek is recited in Deuteronomy 25:17-19. The command is again related through the prophet Shmuel in, I Samuel 15:2-3.

<sup>8</sup> I Samuel 15:28.

<sup>9</sup> Esther Rabbah 8:5.

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 25:17-19.

<sup>11</sup> Rashi, Deuteronomy 25:18 s.v.: "*Asher karcha baderech.*"

states in the Hebrew: “קרע ה” [“*kara*”].<sup>12</sup> Similarly, when Mordechai hears of Haman’s decree to destroy the Jewish nation, he too rips his garments by the use of the Hebrew word: “ויקרע” [“*vayikra*”].<sup>13</sup> Thereafter, Megillat Esther relates that Mordechai recounts to Esther all that occurred concerning Haman’s plans to destroy the Jewish nation; as in the Hebrew: “את כל אשר קרחו” [“*eis kol asher karahu*”].<sup>14</sup> All of these similar rooted and sounding words in the Hebrew appertain to the very nature of the dispute between the Jewish nation and the nation of Amalek. The Jewish people believe in the Divine orchestration of events, whereas the nation of Amalek believes in serendipity, happenstance, chance and the coincidence of natural phenomenon. Indeed, by playing on these words: קרע, קרעו, קרעו, ויקרע, *kara*, *karcha*, *karahu*, *vayikra*, we see that when Saul’s garments are ripped by the prophet Shmuel for refusing to heed the word of G-d in His command to destroy Amalek and its king Agag, it is a prelude and precursor of events centuries later when Mordechai rends his garments upon hearing the news that Haman, the descendent of Agag and Amalek, decreed the eradication of the Jewish nation.

The cause célèbre and catalyst of Haman’s enmity towards Jews—and specifically Mordechai—is highlighted by Megillat Esther when Mordechai refuses to prostrate himself before Haman in defiance of the king’s directive. The word in Hebrew for bowing as stated in Megillat Esther is “כרע,” [“*koreia*”]; another similar sounding word to “קררחו” [“*karahu*”].

Not only did Mordechai and Haman mirror the actions performed by their Biblical counterparts, their lineage descended directly from them as well. Genealogically: “The sons of Esau [were]: Eliphaz, Reuel, Jeush, Jalam and Korah. The sons of Eliphaz [were]: Teman, Omer, Ga-Atam, Kinaz, Timna and Amalek.”<sup>15,16</sup> Targum Sheini relates that Haman was the son of Hammedatha who was from the seed of Agag who was the son of the evil Amalek.<sup>17</sup> Haman was therefore a direct descendant of Amalek who was a direct descendant of Eliphaz who was the son of Esau, Jacob’s brother.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> See fn. 8, supra.

<sup>13</sup> Esther 4:1.

<sup>14</sup> Esther 4:7.

<sup>15</sup> Genesis 36:9-12, and see, I Chronicles 35-36.

<sup>16</sup> See supra fn. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Targum Esther 3:2.

<sup>18</sup> Targum Sheini Esther 3:1. 'Haman ben Serach, ben Boozah, ben Aflitoos, ben D'Yosef, ben Di'Vasim, ben Parus, ben Ma'Adi, ben Bilaqan, ben Antimros, ben Haridoos, ben Shagar, ben Nagar, ben Parmashta, ben Vayizata, ben Agag, ben Sumqi, ben Amalek, ben *peelegesh* Alifaz *bchor* Esav.'

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow low before him, he was filled with wrath. Indeed, Megillat Esther states: "And [Haman] thought scorn to lay hands on Mordechai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordechai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordechai."<sup>19</sup> The word for scorn in Hebrew is "ויבז" ["vayivez"]. The scorn which Haman felt harkened to an ancient Biblical time which was the root-cause of the battle between Haman and Mordechai. The Torah teaches: "And Esau scorned "ויבז" ["vayivez"] his birthright"<sup>20, 21</sup> in selling it to Jacob. The exact same word as mentioned in Megillat Esther, in Hebrew: "ויבז" ["vayivez"], is employed by the Torah to define Esau's innermost feelings when he sold his birthright to Jacob. Likewise, Haman was incensed—"ויבז" ["vayivez"]—at Mordechai's gall in not bowing before him. According to Haman, the Jewish people's act of prostration before him re-legitimized his family's longstanding claim to the original birthright that was formerly allocated and abdicated by his ancestor Esau.<sup>22</sup>

Haman alleged that the descendants of Esau rightfully had ascendancy and supremacy over the progeny of Jacob. Same was evidenced by the fact that when Jacob and his sons came to the Yabok river and were ambushed by Esau and his son Eliphaz; Jacob and his sons were obeisant before Esau. As the Torah recounts:

Jacob looked up and there was Esau, coming with his four hundred men; so he divided the children among Leah, Rachel and the two maidservants. He put the maidservants and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. He [Jacob] himself went on ahead and bowed down to the ground seven times as he approached his brother.<sup>23</sup>

Then the handmaids came near, they and their children, and they bowed down. And Leah also and her children came near, and bowed down; and after came Joseph near and Rachel, and they bowed down.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Esther 3:6.

<sup>20</sup> Genesis 25:34.

<sup>21</sup> Baal HaTurim, Genesis 25:34: "גבי המן דהיינו בווה בן בווה זה המן שיצא מעשו"

<sup>22</sup> Genesis Rabbah 7:10, wherein it states: "Haman desired to seek revenge on the sale of Esau's firstborn birthright."

<sup>23</sup> Genesis 33:1-3. In this instance, the Hebrew word for bowing is "וישתחו", which is different from "כרע." Nonetheless, even Megillat Esther describes bowing as not only "כרע," but also "ומשתחויים" or "ישתחוה."

<sup>24</sup> Genesis 33:6-7.

Haman maintained that Mordechai's very-own ancestors acquiesced in submission to Esau and therefore Jacob himself realized that the sale of the birthright was an invalid sale.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, Mordechai's refusal to prostrate himself before Haman was contemptible. In other words: "See, Mordechai, your very own ancestor bowed to my ancestor despite the fact that the birthright was sold-out from underneath him (Esau). Therefore, you too must recognize and concede, just like your ancestor Jacob, that Esau's claim to the birthright was never relinquished. Hence, you must bow before me just like your ancestors."

Mordechai however, does not incline his head or body towards Haman. Instead, Mordechai defies Haman and proudly asserts that he will not now, and never will, bow before Haman. Mordechai's lineage buoyed his position, and it is thus conveyed in Megillat Esther: "There was a certain Jew in Shushan the castle, whose name was Mordechai the son of Yair the son of Shimei the son of Kish, אִישׁ יִמִּינִי [eesh Yimini]."

אִישׁ יְחִזִּי הָיָה בְּשֹׁמֵן הַבְּמִדָּה וְשֵׁמוֹ מֹרְדֵכַי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן שִׁמְעִי בֶן קִישׁ אִישׁ יִמִּינִי<sup>26</sup>

Mordechai was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, as it says, "אִישׁ יִמִּינִי" ["eesh Yimini"]. The word in Hebrew: "יִמִּינִי" ["Yimini"], appears to be an abstracted form of בִּנְיָמִין [Binyamin], linking an individual with the family of Benjamin. In fact, Mordechai was a direct descendant of King Saul.<sup>27</sup> For example, when the prophet Samuel describes the lineage of Saul, the words which outline the heredity of Mordechai in Megillat Esther<sup>28</sup> are echoed in the Book of Samuel, as it says: "And Saul answered and said: 'Am not I a Benjamite "בֶּן יִמִּינִי" ["ben Yimini"], of the smallest of the tribes of Israel? And my family the

<sup>25</sup> Targum Esther 3:6.

<sup>26</sup> Esther 2:5. And see, Tr. Megillah 13a.

<sup>27</sup> Malbim Esther 4:5 s.v.: 'Ushmo Mordechai.' And see, Targum Sheini 2:5, who recites Mordechai's entire lineage: 'Mordechai ben Yair, ben Shimei, ben Shemida, ben Baaneh, ben Elah, ben Michah, ben Mifiboshes, ben Yehonasan, ben Shaul, ben Kish, ben Avial, ben Dror, ben Bechoras, ben Afiach, ben Shecharim, ben Uzeyahu, ben Shishiq, ben Michael, ben Eliel, ben Amihud, ben Shaftayah, ben Pesuel, ben Pison, ben Malich, ben Yerubuel, ben Yeruchem, ben Chananiah, ben Zevudi, ben Alfael, ben Shimri, ben Zechariah, ben Meiraimus, ben Chushim, ben Shechorah, ben Goozah, ben Uuzah, ben Geira, ben Bela, ben Binyamin, ben Yaakov.' (Interestingly, Mordechai is ten generations descended from Saul, possibly alluding to the ripeness of the generation of Mordechai towards the second acceptance of the Torah. Esther 9:27. And see, Tr. Shabbat 88a and Rashi thereat.)

<sup>28</sup> Esther 2:5.

least of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin? Wherefore then speakest thou to me after this manner?"<sup>29</sup>

On a historical level, it is self-evident that the heritage of both Mordechai and Haman did not merely chance upon each other during the time of Ahasuerus. The conflict displayed between Mordechai and Haman stems from an earlier epoch. It was Mordechai and Haman's destiny to strive against each other, emulating their forefathers Jacob and Esau, who were and are locked—even to this very day—in an ageless-arching struggle and fight, which is the "prototype of fights which lasts through the whole of history."<sup>30</sup>

In light of this backdrop, which son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham is the inheritor? Is it Jacob and Mordechai? Is it Esau and Haman? The debate concerning the birthright—regarding who is the firstborn of Isaac—and who is ultimately destined to receive the bountiful Biblical blessings promised by the Abrahamitic covenant, is the question.

Was Haman's contention that he, a direct descendant of Amalek and Esau, entitled to the birthright of Isaac, veritable? While it is true that Jacob and his sons bowed to Esau at the Yabok River, as mentioned above; one son of Jacob did not prostrate himself before Esau. Benjamin did not bow to Esau for he was not yet born.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Mordechai rightfully contended that as he directly descended from Benjamin who had not previously bowed to Esau, he too would never lower himself before Haman the descendant of Amalek and Esau.<sup>32</sup>

Mordechai would never bow to a Haman. Indeed, even Esau himself conceded that the sale of the birthright to Jacob was valid, as the Torah attests: "And Esau said: 'I have enough; my brother, let that which thou hast be thine.'" Rashi citing to the Midrash explains that Esau ultimately conceded the birthright to Jacob and his descendants.<sup>33</sup> Perforce, Haman and his ten sons hang from the tree and their memory is the butt of scorn for all time, while Mordechai's memory is exalted and venerated for all time.

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<sup>29</sup> I Samuel 9:21.

<sup>30</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, Genesis 32:25.

<sup>31</sup> Esther Rabbah 2:5. *See also*, Genesis 32:23, where it states: "And he rose up that night, and took his two wives, and his two handmaids, and his eleven children, and passed over the ford of the Yabok."

<sup>32</sup> Targum Sheini 3:3; and see, Patshegen Hakitav, thereat.

<sup>33</sup> Rashi, Genesis 33:9 s.v.: *'Yehi lecha asher lecha.'*

Mordechai the Benjamite, is also called “Yehudi” (יהודי), signifying that he represented all of *Bnei Yisrael*; not merely the descendants of his own tribe. As the Jewish people are called “Yehudim” (יהודים), it is the historical record that their central place of worship is Jerusalem, located on the border straddling both the provinces of Benjamin and Yehudah. Mordechai’s heroism defined the essence of Judaism and the salvation of *Am Yisrael*. Because of Mordechai, was the blessing of the Torah of Moses restored [“ה' ישכון לבטח. ובין כתפיו שכי”] [B]eloved of *Hashem* shall dwell securely beside Him... He dwells between his shoulders”),<sup>34</sup> and thus were the Jewish people permitted to return to Israel and rebuild the Temple. “For Rabbi Samuel son of Rabbi Isaac said: the Alter occupied a cubit in the portion of Judah. Rabbi Chamah son of Rabbi Chaninah said: a strip issued from Judah’s portion and entered Benjamin’s portion.”<sup>35</sup> Mordechai was the paradigmatic Jew: איש ימיני — איש יהודי.



<sup>34</sup> See also, Deuteronomy 33:12 and Rashi thereat s.v.: ‘*LiBinyamin Amar.*’

<sup>35</sup> Tr. Zevachim 53b; and see Tr. Yoma 12a; and also see, Yalkut Shimoni, Parshat Re’eh 887.

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# Hashem's Ambassadors

By: Rabbi Shalom Hammer<sup>1</sup>

Jewish history has proven that to secure our survival we must maintain our identity. This is manifested by serving *Hashem* and strengthening our religious commitment. With Purim, it is incumbent upon us to enhance this holiday, which reflects the story of our great nation.

Megillat Esther closes by stating that Mordechai was endorsed by most of his brethren on the Sanhedrin, but not unanimously.<sup>2</sup> The Talmud conveys that some of the sages of the Sanhedrin separated themselves from Mordechai.<sup>3</sup> Why was Mordechai rejected by members of the Sanhedrin when he was a *Talmid Chacham* and primarily concerned with the survival of *Bnei Yisrael*? Rashi explains that Mordechai had sacrificed Torah study for the sake of diplomacy.<sup>4</sup> However, even Rashi's explanation is unsatisfactory. By pursuing this position, Mordechai attempted to save the Jewish people. Surely Mordechai's interest in *Hatzalat Nefashot* takes precedence to studying Torah.

I suggest the following interpretation of Rashi which is based on identifying who Mordechai's arch nemesis was. Haman descended from Amalek whose purpose was to desecrate the authenticity of the Torah and destroy the unique character of the Jewish people. The Torah states that Amalek attacked the *necheshalim*, the weak and the elderly.<sup>5</sup> The Sifri comments that the word *necheshalim* refers to spiritual weakness rather than a physical state. Amalek grows stronger when *Bnai Yisrael's* devotion to the Torah becomes weaker. Similarly, Haman was empowered and his acrimonious decrees were installed as *Bnai Yisrael's* spiritual fervor deteriorated. Mordechai was aware of this correlation and knew that the success of the Jewish people was conditional upon their religious faithfulness. Perhaps Mordechai could have motivated *Klal Yisrael* towards Torah observance and repentance before Haman revealed his twisted plot. Had Mordechai done so, perhaps the need to rely upon the Purim miracle could

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<sup>1</sup> Ram, Yeshivat Hesder Kiryat Gat. Author of: 'The Family Parsha Book' and 'The Eybeshitz Haggadah: Experiencing Redemption.'

<sup>2</sup> Esther 10:3.

<sup>3</sup> Tr. Megillah 16b.

<sup>4</sup> Tr. Megillah 16b, Rashi, s.v., "*Shepeershu meemenu.*"

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 25:18.

have been avoided to begin with. Consequently, Mordechai was rejected by parts of the Sanhedrin as his own endeavors may have obstructed sensitivity to *Bnei Yisrael's* spiritual temperament.

A Jewish person must be aware of his surroundings but first and foremost he must be sensitive to what makes him a Jew. While it is important that we behave cautiously and diplomatically, we must consistently question our cause for diplomacy. Those who view a synagogue as a social venue with which to promote social activities are wrong. When people congregate in the synagogue for the sole purpose of enjoying a sociable and candid evening, then they fail to realize the significance of what a *shul* offers. The prayers and study that take place inside the synagogue differentiates us from the rest of society. It is our *raison d'être*.

The same is true with regard to *Eretz Yisrael*. *Eretz Yisrael* is where the *Shechinah* dwells and therefore it must be treated like a *makom kadosh*. *Eretz Yisrael* requires leaders with a vision whose concerns are communal and whose interests are not exclusively personal. When Esther realized that the Jewish nation's survival was being threatened, she summoned Mordechai and told him: "Go assemble all the Jews of Shushan, and fast on my behalf."<sup>6</sup> Esther was concerned for the welfare of the Jewish people and she realized that their redemption would materialize only if they united through prayer and repentance.

The Jewish people must conduct themselves diplomatically but we are not diplomats of society. We are *Hashem's* ambassadors, and we represent *Hashem's* country. To ensure the future of Jewish history and the Jewish State, our mission is to pray, learn and further our subservience to Him.



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<sup>6</sup> Esther 5:16.

## Happy Purim... whatever that means...

By: Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky<sup>1</sup>

*Humorist Leo Rosten told of the Nifkowitz family who made a fortune and moved to Oyster Bay. To fit in, they changed their name to Northridge and soon were invited to join a prestigious country club. And there, at a charity event is where the waiter spilled hot soup right on the lap of Mrs. Northridge. "Gevalt!" she exclaimed, "whatever that means!"*

It ended on a happy note. The Jews were spared, the villain hung, the enemies defeated, and our leaders exalted. And for the simple folks? The Jewish nation that was spared annihilation? Well, the Megillah tells us they, too, walked away from the would-be tragedy with something. "For the Jews there was light, joy, happiness and splendor."<sup>2</sup> Sounds good enough. After all, we all could use a little enlightenment, joy, happiness and splendor. Why not?

But it's not good enough for the Talmudic sages. Not that they had something against light, joy, happiness and splendor, it's just that they had a different take on them. The Talmud in Tractate Megillah expounds: "Light means Torah, gladness means *bris milah*, joy means *Yom Tov* (The Festivals), and splendor means *Tefillin*."<sup>3</sup> The blaring question is: why did the simple narration not suffice? What bothered our sages that forced them to elevate the joy from simple celebration to lofty idealism?

*At the great stadium in Moscow, back in the mid 1970's, Chairman Leonoid Brezhnev was addressing a large audience filled with the Communist Party faithful. "By the year 2000," he declared, "every family in the Soviet Union will have their own airplane!" The crowd roared with sheer exhilaration! Suddenly a small voice emerged from beneath the throngs! "Mr. Premier!" he shouted "Mr. Premier! I do not understand! Why would a family in Moscow need an airplane?" All of a sudden, a great hush overtook the crowd. There was stone silence. Then from nowhere a voice boomed. "You fool! Of course we'll need an airplane! Maybe there will be potatoes in Kiev!"*

It seems that the Talmud is not satisfied with joy just meaning joy or

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<sup>2</sup> Esther 8:15.

<sup>3</sup> Tr. Megillah 16b.

happiness meaning smiley faces and have-a-nice-day bumper stickers. The Gemara feels that the Jews were celebrating a reclamation of things more spiritual than a smile.

Happiness is meaningless unless we have where to put it. Joy, enlightenment, and splendor have no value if they cannot attach to permanent spirituality. Before the FCC liberated us from the insanity back in the early 1970s, cigarette manufacturers spent millions trying to convince us that happiness was the taste of Kent®. Today they are still attempting to convince us what joy is. It seems that the world at large is confused. There are no clear definitions because yesterday's joy is today's unfulfillment. The Megillah wrote that the Jews had happiness and splendor but the Sages knew that there must have been more. If happiness were the revelry of a fleeting moment, then Purim would have been at most a local celebration—at least historically. They would never have had the gumption to make the astonishing prediction that the holidays of Purim shall never pass from the Jewish nation nor will the story ever be forgotten! They knew that the enlightening aspect of Purim that was destined to last for eternity must be linked to eternity. Enlightenment is Torah! The joy that was to last forever must be intrinsically linked to a joy that waxes eternal! Joy is *Bris Milah*. Happiness that just ends in drinks and partying is as ludicrous as giving people airplanes to find potatoes! It is a worthless gift. So this year our Purim celebrations ought to be special. Our joy must manifest itself in helping the poor. Our food and drink should include those less fortunate. Our *shalach manos* baskets should contain more meaning than the gift items placed inside. Because if you are looking this Purim for happiness without any spiritual meaning, you might as well just smoke a Kent®.

Best wishes for a Purim filled with light, joy, happiness and splendor ... and you know what that means!



# Baruch Mordecai and Arrur Haman; the Mitzvah of Ad D'lo Yadaa

By: Rabbi Dr. David Wiseman

The day of Purim is filled with *mitzvos*. We begin our celebration with the first reading of Megillas Esther—Purim night—and continue the festivities throughout Purim day, culminating with the completion of the special Purim *seudah*. Of all the *mitzvos* specific to Purim, none stir as much emotion and controversy as the *mitzvah* to become intoxicated until the distinction between blessed is Mordecai and cursed is Haman, is blurred. What seems unique to this *mitzvah* is how both the halachic authorities and aggadic commentaries weigh-in on the extent of this *mitzvah* and the depth, import and meaning behind it. The goal of this essay is to review the Gemara in Megillah and the pertinent *poskim*, in addition to looking at the aggadic aspects of this *mitzvah*.

The Gemara in Megillah famously begins with a quote attributed to Rava:

אמר רבא: מחייב איניש לבסומי בפוריא עד דלא ידע בין ארור המן לברוך מרדכי

Rava said: 'It is the duty of man to mellow himself [with wine—Rashi] on Purim until he cannot tell the difference between cursed be Haman and blessed be Mordecai.'<sup>1</sup>

While the above quoted Gemara may well be familiar to many, it is important to review what is written immediately following the statement of Rava. The Gemara continues with the following story:

Rabbah and R. Zera joined together in a Purim feast. They became mellow [after drinking wine] and Rabbah arose and cut R. Zera's throat. On the next day he prayed on his behalf and revived him. Next year he said, 'Will your honor come and we will have the Purim feast together.' He replied: 'A miracle does not take place on every occasion.'<sup>2</sup>

It would seem instructive, that a story of averted tragedy from drinking alcohol follows the *memre*, saying, of Rava. In fact, the Ran<sup>3</sup> quotes Rabbeinu

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<sup>1</sup> Tr. Megillah 7b.

<sup>2</sup> Supra, fn.1.

<sup>3</sup> Rif, Megillah 3b (pg. 6), s.v.: 'Michayev inish.'

Ephraim who declares that the story of Rabbah and R. Zera was placed in its position in the Gemara, to push-off the teaching of Rava. The Baal HaMaor states that the *halacha* is not like Rabbeinu Ephraim.<sup>4</sup>

If most *poskim* disagree with Rabbeinu Ephraim, there still seems to be a sentiment that due to the dangers of intoxication, moderation is in order. Tosefos<sup>5</sup> quotes a Yerushalmi that there was a prayer similar to *Shoshanas Yaakov* that had more verses: *arrurah Zeresh, brucha Esther, arrurah kol haReshaim, bruchim kol haYehudim*. That the concept of blurring 'blessed is Mordecai and cursed is Haman,' includes confusing all the differences mentioned in this prayer. What can be inferred from this Tosefos is that the level of intoxication needed to fulfill the obligation, would be less than had otherwise been assumed.

The Karbon Nesanel<sup>6</sup> explains that the drinking of wine is to gladden the heart, and when the Gemara states, '*ad d'lo yadaa*' (until you don't know), it really means, "*ad v'lo ad bichlal*." In other words, one should drink and become intoxicated, just to the point of confusing '*baruch Mordecai*' and '*arrur Haman*,' but not past that point. The Karbon Nesanel further explains that Rabbah who did not drink alcohol the rest of the year, when he drank on Purim, he became as drunk as Lot. However, one should avoid becoming as drunk as Lot. The Bach<sup>7</sup> sees the story of Rabbah as having halachik import. One should not reach a level of drunkenness; rather, one should drink more than one is accustomed in order that he should be happy and in the proper 'spirit' during the Purim *seudah*. The Bach maintains that the meaning of '*ad d'lo yadaa*,' is that when referring to '*baruch Mordecai*' and '*arrur Haman*,' sometimes one says '*arrur Haman*' first; and sometimes a person becomes confused and says, '*baruch Mordecai*,' first.

The Beis Yoseph<sup>8</sup> references the Orchos Chaim who distinguishes between '*libsume*' and '*lihishtacher*.' The former word means to become mellow, whereas the latter means to become drunk. He points out that actual drunkenness (*shichrus*), is a prohibition (*issur gamur*), and there is no bigger

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<sup>4</sup> Rif, Megillah 3b (pg. 6), HaMaor Haqatan, s.v.: '*Amar Rabbah*.'

<sup>5</sup> Tosafos, Megillah 7b, s.v.: '*D'lo yada*.'

<sup>6</sup> Rosh, Megillah 7b:8 (pg. 66), s.v.: '*Amar Rava: Mchayev inish l'bisumei*.'

<sup>7</sup> Bach, Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim, Hilchos Megillah §695, s.v.: '*Tzarich sheyistacher*.'

<sup>8</sup> Bais Yoseph, Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim, Hilchos Megillah §695, s.v.: '*Mitzva li'harbos*.'

sin. Drunkenness can lead to promiscuity, murder and other sins, not to mention the potential for tremendous *chillul Hashem*, profaning G-d's Name through other inappropriate actions.

Within the discussion of the obligations for the Purim *seudah*, the Rambam writes that one should drink enough wine to become drunk and fall asleep from this inebriated state.<sup>9</sup> The Hagahos Maymonis quotes the Raavyah<sup>10</sup> that drinking is a *mitzvah* but is not *meakev* (מעכב); meaning, one is still considered to have fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *seudas Purim*. Two important ideas seem evident from the words and strategic location of this Rambam. First, the *mitzvah* of drinking wine seems to be specific to the *seudah*. To get drunk on Purim night has no place in Halacha. The second idea is to follow the Rambam's lead, like many do,<sup>11</sup> and drink a smaller amount and take a nap, thereby blurring the difference between 'baruch Mordecai' and 'arrur Haman,' while sleeping. Taking the Raavyah to heart, if a person doesn't know how to set limits and avoid *chillul Hashem*, it would appear that it would be better to refrain altogether.

To describe the guiding halachik views and opinions without a discussion of the aggadic, and philosophical principles that give depth and insight to this unique *mitzvah*, would be a disservice. Even if one has no intention of becoming inebriated on Purim, to understand the concept of blurring the difference between 'arrur Haman' and 'baruch Mordecai,' can enrich a person's Purim celebration.

I am sure that at some point the reader probably wondered for a moment why do we constantly refer to this drunken state as '*ad d'lo yadaa*,' until one doesn't know the difference between 'cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordecai.' Never once is it mentioned that one becomes so drunk, they couldn't tell the difference between Haman and Mordecai. Rabbi Moshe Shternbach in Moadim Uzmanim<sup>12</sup> looks at this concept as a form of test: One should be drunk to the point of confusion and yet still within the depths of his heart, rightly know that Mordecai is always blessed and Haman is always cursed.

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<sup>9</sup> Rambam, Hilchos Megillah 2:15.

<sup>10</sup> Hagahos Maymonis, Hilchos Megillah 2:15§2, quoting Raavyah in §564.

<sup>11</sup> Rama, Orech Chaim §695:2; and Aruch Hashulchan, Orech Chaim §695:2.

<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Moshe Shternbach, Moadim Uzmanim, Vol. 2 §191, s.v.: '*Chayav adam li'besumei*.'

The Ben Yehoyada<sup>13</sup> points-out that the biggest miracle of Purim was the change and amendments to the letters sent-out from Ahashverosh. The letters changed from letters of potential death to the Jews, to letters of salvation. Drinking on Purim is to waken one's heart to rejoice and celebrate this integral miracle; that the letters were changed and *Bnei Yisrael* went from certain death to life!

The connection to '*arrur Haman*' and '*baruch Mordecai*' is that the letters were amended with regards to the Purim story, between the hanging of Haman, which represents the '*arrur Haman*' and the elevation and bestowing of greatness on Mordecai. The Megillah says: "ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות" ["And Mordecai went out from before the king adorned in the clothing of royalty."] <sup>14</sup>

Ben Yehoyada cautions that drinking should be a means to elevate the spirit and to appreciate and rejoice in the miracles of Purim. If one is drunk "like a stone," or like Lot, and is past the ability to rejoice in the day; he rhetorically asks, "Why should one drink anymore?" Quoting his friend R. Yaakov, Ben Yehoyada explains that the *mitzvah* to drink on Purim is to make a distinction between drinking for evil reasons and drinking for a *mitzvah*. Drinking serves to distinguish between the advice the cursed Haman gave to Ahashverosh to allow Jews to stumble by partaking in the food and wine orgies of the palace parties and the *tikkun* (rectification) Mordecai established to drink wine during the Purim *seudah* in the form of a *mitzvah*. The *tikkun* was a measure-for-measure to correct the improper approach to alcohol the Jews of Shushan displayed during the earliest events of the Purim story. This concept seems to echo the earlier sentiments of the essay, that any *chillul Hashem* stemming from alcohol use, no longer constitutes any *tikkun*.

A third interpretation presented in his *sefer*, kabbalistically connects Haman to the Nachash (original serpent), which was why he was so strong. The original Nachash lost his hands and feet as punishment, and was called *ketteà* (קטע), or lame. Both, '*baruch Mordecai*' and '*arrur Haman*' have the same numerical value, 502.<sup>15</sup> The numerical difference between *arrur* (407), and *baruch* (228) is *ketteà* (179). *Arrur* is greater in value by this same amount of 179, or the word *ketteà* (קטע) (*arrur* = 407 and *baruch* = 228; 502-228=179). The Arizal explains that if the Nachash had not lost his hands and feet, he would

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<sup>13</sup> Chidushei Aggados al haShas, Tr. Megillah 7b Vol. 2, s.v.: '*Amar Rava*.'

<sup>14</sup> Esther 8:15.

<sup>15</sup> Bach, Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim, Hilchos Megillah §695.

be strong enough to destroy the world. The miracle of Purim is that even though Haman had the power of the Nachash and could have used this power to cause destruction, Hashem saved our nation.

The Slonomer Rebbe in the *sefer* Nesivos Shalom<sup>16</sup> begins his exposition of our topic with a sense of bewilderment. How is it possible that on a day considered as holy as Yom Kippur, where we give charity to all outstretched hands and we read of destroying Amalek, and we treat Purim as a second *Kabbalas haTorah*, we could have a *mitzvah* to drink? In his classic chassidic approach, he reads the Gemara that, “one is obligated *libesumei bepurya*,” to get drunk **from** Purim, not to get drunk **on** Purim. Figuratively, it means that one should get drunk on the spiritual holiness of the day, not through imbibing wine!

He explains that the concept of ‘*ad d’lo yadaa*’ between ‘*arrur Haman*’ and ‘*baruch Mordecai*’ finds expression in all the *mitzvos* of the day: reading the Megillah, *mishloach manos*, wiping out Amalek, and *Kabbalas haTorah*. The aspects of Purim can be divided into three, which relate to the attributes through which one becomes complete in his service to Hashem.

The *mitzvah* of reading the Megillah relates to man becoming closer to his Creator. There are times in life when one feels close to Hashem and that is the idea of ‘blessed is Mordecai.’ When we feel distant from Hashem, during certain dark times, we are however, connected to ‘cursed is Haman.’ Purim is a time to recognize that the bright times as well as the dark times, all stem from the same Creator. We are required to **blur** the ‘*arrur Haman*’ and the ‘*baruch Mordecai*,’ in order to feel in our hearts, that there really is no difference between the times when we feel close to Hashem and the times when we feel distant and pushed aside. In both situations, throughout everything in life, we need to continue to see ourselves as close to Hashem.

The second aspect of Purim is to create closeness between man and his fellow man through the *mitzvos* of *mishloach manos*, *seudah* and *matanos laevyonim*. Purim is the time to increase friendship even with those people you are not close with the rest of the year (*li’harbos ray’oos*). The rest of the year, differences may keep people apart (*arrur Haman*), but on Purim we stress our similarities, our closeness and our unity (*baruch Mordecai*).

Finally, the third aspect of perfection, of completion in service to Hashem, is to recognize the sanctity of man unto himself. The rest of the year we are involved in spirituality (*baruch Mordecai*), as well as more mundane activities (*arrur*

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<sup>16</sup> Hemah Yinachamuni, Maamarei Parshas Vayetze, pgs. 57-59.

*Haman*). This is the chasm and vast difference between the nature of Amalek on one hand, and *Kabbalas haTorah* on the other. Purim represents a day where all actions can lead to Hashem, (*ki malah haaretz kinyanechah*). Purim, in contrast to Yom Kippur (where all activity is spiritual and we must avoid eating and other physical pleasures), is a day where the spirituality emanates **from** the eating, drinking, dancing, singing and the joy; as well as the learning, praying, and the reading of the Megillah. Purim is that special time to **blur** the spiritual and the physical and we are better Jews for the experience.

I want to conclude with an original idea that borrows from an essay by the Tolner Rebbe, Harav Yitzchok Menachem Weinberg, in his *sefer* Hemah Yinachamuni. In *Parshas Vayetze*, Leah names her fourth child “Yehudah,” which means to give thanks. The commentaries attributed a new attribute of being *makir tov*, of giving thanks, to Leah. And yet, we are forced to ask, did none of the *Avos* give thanks to Hashem before Leah? We see from the beginning that Cain and Abel offered sacrifices to Hashem as a form of thanks; and certainly the *Avos* showed their appreciation to Hashem as well. Rav Weinberg explains that Leah didn’t only thank Hashem for the four sons she was blessed with. Leah could also now thank Hashem for the suffering she endured, the slights and even hatred she felt, because she was not Rachel. Leah could now see that the distress, tears and anguish, was all good, and even worthy of giving thanks.

I find it interesting that the two facets of Purim we are told to blur are ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordecai.’ If one thinks about it, both are actually good outcomes! The distinction is not so great. When thinking about ‘*baruch Mordecai*,’ I think of the continuation of the Shoshanas Yaakov song, where we sing “*baruch Mordecai ... haYehudi*.” Most of us are familiar with the knowledge that Mordecai is a descendent of Binyamin and not Yehudah. Yet until today, for twenty-five hundred years, Mordecai is still connected with the name Yehudah. Maybe the connection to the name Yehudah is as Leah intended. Leah was able to meld, to **blur** the blessed and cursed events of her life and find only thanks. The lesson of Mordecai ‘*haYehudi*’ and of the entire Purim story is that our attitude and our perception can help us see that everything is guided by Hashem and it can and should be for us a blessing.



# Purim and the Secret of Happiness<sup>1</sup>

By: Rabbi Yaakov Wohlgeleer<sup>2</sup>

One of the major themes that we find as we approach the Holiday of Purim is the focus on happiness. Almost universally, we find the day dedicated to joy and happiness and it behooves us to explore what role this idea plays in this holiday specifically, and in Judaism as a whole.

We know that the name of something embodies its essence. A name can give insight into the character of a person or even the main point of a holiday. The Megillah tells us that Purim received its name from the Hebrew word '*Pur*', the lottery that Haman cast to decide when he would carry out his plans to exterminate the Jews. Why is that part of the story used to create the name? What about that lottery is so central to the Holiday of Purim, that it then becomes the essence of the holiday for all of time?

The Talmud relates an interesting story that may help us understand these problems. During the time of the Talmud one of the rabbis would attend weddings and during the ceremony he would sing a little song. The lyrics of the song went something like this: "Woe to us for we will all eventually die. Woe to us for we will all eventually die..."<sup>3</sup> How inappropriate! At the wedding itself the rabbi would seemingly detract from the celebration by focusing on a reality that no one was focused on at that time. What was he trying to teach the wedding guests and is there a greater message that we can learn from his song?

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig explains that there was a deep and important message being taught at those weddings. The rabbi was telling the people that if we go through life without remembering that there is a thing called death, we could get used to life and take it for granted. We could begin to think that we are indestructible and that we deserve life and don't have to earn it. Without remembering the concept of death, the guests at the wedding could not truly appreciate life.

This idea can be illustrated in our daily lives. You never hear people walking into doctors or dentists' offices and commenting, "Wow, my spleen feels

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from a speech given by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig, Rosh Yeshiva Talmudic University, Miami Beach, Florida.

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Rabbi of the Westmount Shul & Learning Centre, Thornhill, Ontario.

<sup>3</sup> Tr. Berachot 31a.

great today! Wow my teeth feel amazing this morning.” The reason is obvious. Anything that we become accustomed to, we take for granted and stop realizing that it is a gift from G-d. By mentioning death at weddings, the rabbi created an appreciation for life and proclaimed loud and clear, “don’t take life for granted.” It is a gift from G-d and be thankful for every opportunity He gives us.

Haman, who we know had more riches and power than he could handle, suffered from this attitude. He had everything that a man could ask for, a loving family, a successful career and extreme wealth. But it all meant nothing to him. He wanted more. Haman should have been the happiest man in the kingdom but happiness proved to be elusive to him. He felt that all that he had amassed and accumulated was worthless. It couldn’t make him happy because he felt that he deserved it all. He took all that he had for granted, looking instead to find happiness in new things and new opportunities. That is why he was so focused on one little Jew who wouldn’t serve him, instead of focusing on the millions who were loyally bowing.

Haman teaches us an important lesson about life. As long as I feel that I am entitled to something, like I deserve it, that thing cannot bring me happiness. The only object, position or acquisition that can bring me happiness is that thing that I feel is above and beyond what I am entitled to. When a person gets their paycheck at the end of the month—unfortunately for many—they can’t find joy in that. They feel like they deserve it and it is coming to them, and they tend to forget that everything we have is a gift from G-d.

You can witness this attitude in any casino across the world. People are willing to gamble their entire paycheck for the chance to win more, searching for joy because what they take for granted can’t do it for them. It is the thrill of winning something that we think we don’t deserve, or that we didn’t earn that brings people happiness. If people would just take a moment to realize that they are risking all the amazing gifts that Hashem gives them: their family, other relationships and their hard-earned money, they would refrain from throwing their money onto the roulette table.

This concept becomes the central theme of Purim. The ‘*Pur*’ or lottery that Haman arranged was for exactly this reason. Haman needed that rush; that feeling of getting something extra, because he took everything else for granted. Nothing in his life brought him happiness, until he stood in his own casino and bet against the Jews. He needed to experience the sensation that luck and fate were on his side to get a good feeling from his situation. That is why the lottery

that Haman created becomes the namesake of this holiday. The entire essence of the day is a focus on being happy with our lives. The only way to do this is to stop taking everything that G-d gives us for granted, and stop running after the extra-stuff that we think will bring happiness.

On Purim we need to focus on what we have. We need to realize that even the stuff that we have already acquired is a gift from Hashem. Look at your family and thank Hashem for your family. Look at your house, your job, your community, and thank G-d for all the gifts that He has given you and that He should continue to give you.



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