

A Holiday Reader

*Original Essays
by the Staff of the
Cincinnati Community Kollel*

Purim Volume II Unmasked

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Preface

WELCOME TO OUR NEWEST HOLIDAY READER, *PURIM Unmasked* Volume II.

Purim is a day for us to see G-d in the daily events of our lives. Yet the very story is a tale of politics and intrigue, with nary a mention of G-d. Even the name itself, Purim, means “lots,” a classic game of chance. Is it mere chance that runs our lives, or are our lives Divinely directed? *Purim Unmasked* will explore the depth of this holiday and help us see that, through all the seeming chance of our history, there is a path appointed for the Jewish People and for each one of us.

Wishing you a joyous and meaningful Purim,



Rabbi Meir Minster



Rabbi David Spetner

Thank you!

To Shmuel Plotsker and Yitzchak Sperka,
for your editorial assistance.

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An Introduction

Purim for the Uninitiated

THE ESSAYS IN THIS BOOKLET EXPLORE SOME OF THE themes which underlie the holiday of Purim, its history, its laws, and its customs. Purim takes place on the fourteenth of the Hebrew month of Adar (more on that soon), thirty days before Pesach (Passover). The following is a brief outline of the holiday and its story.

The First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians at the end of the fifth century BCE. By the middle of the next century, the vast majority of the Jewish people was under the rule of the Persian Empire and its king, Achashveirosh (Ahasuerus). In the year 355 BCE, Haman, the Persian viceroy, convinced the King to sign an edict allowing for the eradication of all Jews in Persian territory. The Jews were now threatened with near extinction. (In contrast, the Nazis in World War II eventually controlled one third of the world's Jews.)

As Providence would have it, Achashveirosh had recently executed his original queen, Vashti, and married Esther—who, unknown to him, was a Jewess; her uncle was a member of the Great Assembly (the rabbinical leadership at that time). Esther imposed a seventy-two hour fast on the Jews of Persia, coinciding with the first three days of Passover, after which she presented herself to the King. Two days later, Haman was hanged, and the King had authorized the defense of the Jews.

Eleven months later, on the fourteenth of Adar (the date of the planned extermination of the Jews), civil war erupted. By the end of the next day, the Jews had killed thousands of Persian anti-Semites in self defence, and the Jewish people was saved.

The next year, the holiday of Purim was permanently established, a celebration of the miraculous salvation of the Jews. The holiday is observed in most places on the fourteenth of Adar; **Purim** cities which were walled in the times of Joshua (such as Jerusalem)

observe the holiday on the fifteenth, which is known as Shushan Purim. The thirteenth of Adar is observed as Ta'anis Esther, the sunrise-to-dusk Fast of Esther.

Shushan Purim Ta'anis Esther

Four special mitzvos (commandments) are observed on Purim—reading the Megillah (the biblical Book of Esther); sending gifts of food (*mishlo'ach manos*, also called *shalach manos*); giving charity to the poor (*matanos l'evyonim*); and celebrating with a festive meal (*se'uda*).

The Megillah is read twice on Purim, once in the evening and once in the morning. (A Jewish calendar day begins and ends at sunset.) Whenever the name of the wicked Haman is read, the congregation responds by making noise, customarily with noisemakers called *graggers* or *ra'ashanim*.

Megillah Graggers/Ra'ashanim

Mishlo'ach manos involves sending a minimum of two types of ready-to-consume food or drink to at least one person, who needs not be poor. Typically, people give *mishlo'ach manos* to several people (neighbors, coworkers, and friends).

Mishlo'ach Manos

In contrast, *matanos l'evyonim* (gifts to the needy) must be given to at least two people, and the recipients must be poor. Although the gifts can be in the form of food or dry goods, money is usually given. Of the two types of gift-giving on Purim, this is the more important, since *mishlo'ach manos* doesn't necessarily involve helping the destitute.

Matanos L'evyonim

The feast on Purim is eaten in the afternoon, usually in the company of friends. In contrast with other Jewish celebrations, where moderation is the norm, there is an obligation to drink alcohol at this meal.

Se'uda

In addition to these four mitzvos, many have the custom of masquerading on Purim. (This has led to the unfortunate but popular misperception that Purim is a “Jewish Halloween.”) Another prevalent custom is the eating of hamantaschen (*oznei Haman* in Hebrew), triangular pastries filled with jam, fruit, or poppy seeds. These are said to resemble either Haman's hat or his ears.

Hamantaschen/Oznei Haman



Rabbi David Spetner

Purim and the Primeval Light

And G-d called the light “Day (*Yom*).”—GENESIS 1:5

The light of the first day was stored away for the righteous in the World To Come.—TALMUD, CHAGIGA 12A

Man could see with the light of the first day from one end of the world to the other.—IBID.

Where is Esther alluded to in the Torah? “*V'anochi Haster Aster ponai bayom hahu*, and I will surely hide My face on that day” (Deuteronomy 31:18).—TALMUD, CHULLIN 139B

[The miracle of] Esther was the end of all miracles.—TALMUD, YOMA 29B

THE LIGHT OF THE FIRST DAY OF CREATION WAS DIFFERENT from any light that followed in history. We may not be able to understand how it differed physically, but it certainly had a special spiritual dimension. We can appreciate one aspect of the primeval light by exploring the idea that Man could use it to see “from one end of the world to the other.”

When one studies Torah with no motive other than to understand the wisdom of G-d (*Torah lishma*), we are taught (*Avos* 6:1) that among other benefits, one gains the ability to give counsel. Thus, throughout history Jews have turned to their spiritual leaders for guidance even in things mundane.

One example: Rabbi Elchonon Wasserman¹ was approached by a businessman asking him whether he should involve himself in a new venture. Rav Elchonon asked him to wait for a few minutes. Rav

1 Leading Lithuanian Rosh Yeshiva (1875-1941)

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Elchonon proceeded to open his volume of Talmud and study it for a few minutes. He closed the volume and offered the man his opinion. Afterwards, a student watching the incident observed that nothing in the section of Talmud the man had studied was relevant to his question. Rav Elchonon explained that Torah in general illuminates one's mind and helps him to think straight about any subject.

How the Torah accomplishes this can be understood from a comment of R' Yisrael Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Chassidic movement. When R' Yisrael would be asked for counsel, he too would study Torah first before responding. He explained that the Talmud's statement that with the primeval light Man could see "from one end of the world to the other" means that with the fullness of that light he had a fundamental understanding of all of Creation. When that light was hidden, it was hidden in the Torah. When a person studies Torah purely, some of that light is revealed and it illuminates his mind and his understanding of the world.

Rabbi Chaim of Tchernowitz, in his work *Sidduro Shel Shabbos*, offers another insight into the ongoing role of the primeval light. He writes that on the first day of Creation, when G-d called the light "day," it may be understood as referring specifically to the primeval light of that first day. In this sense, G-d's "calling" the light "day" makes the word "day" a kind of nickname for the primeval light. R' Chaim writes that this can help us understand uses of the word "day" (*yom*) throughout the Torah. He shows how the word "day" is used to introduce the Sabbath and festivals, such as "*uv'yom haShabbos*—and on the day of the Sabbath";² "*uv'yom habikkurim*—and on the Day of the First Fruits"³ (referring to Shavu'os); and "*bayom hash'mini*—on the eighth day [of Sukkos]".⁴ The holidays are days of positive spiritual influence whose source comes from the primeval light. It is also the primeval light which G-d utilizes in cases of miraculous salvation such as the Splitting of the Sea. That is why just before the Song of the Sea we find the words "*Vayosha Hashem bayom hahu*—G-d saved on that day".⁵

The miraculous events of Purim represented a new phase in his-

tory. As we quoted above, Purim was the "end of all miracles," but only in the sense that it marked the end of miracles in which G-d let Himself be seen directly intervening into nature, such as the Splitting of the Sea. From Purim on, G-d would continue to intervene as He always had, on a daily basis. However, until Purim, there would be times of great significance where G-d would openly change nature and influence the world in a very overt way. Writes R' Chaim, those were times of intense "day," *yom*, with a great influence of the primeval light. Purim is alluded to in the Torah as the time when G-d would hide His "face," "on that *day*." The miraculous events of Purim were also a time of intense "day" (both the Splitting of the Sea and the allusion to Purim use the term "*bayom hahu*"), yet they were hidden and clothed in nature. G-d's name does not appear in the book of Esther, but the discerning eye can not help but see the hand of G-d guiding all of the events.



2 Numbers 28:9

3 Numbers 28:26

4 Numbers 28:35

5 Exodus 14:30

Two Jews... Three Opinions!?

THIS QUIP SEEMS TO ACCURATELY CAPTURE THE DIVERSITY and division that run through the Jewish world, now and through most of our history. Yet the Talmud itself teaches that there is an exception to every rule. In analyzing two remarkable examples of exceptions to the rule and what they have in common, we can better understand our true essence as a people.

Let us start with an investigation of the very mysterious holiday of Purim—this is, after all, a Purim journal! On its surface, Purim is a holiday combining a variety of disparate elements and, on their surface, peculiar observances. However, a closer look may lead us to recognize a surprising unifying theme—of unity!

The wicked Haman made note of Jewish disunity when claiming “they are a scattered, detached people...”¹ He may have been making a proper observation about our state of affairs at that moment. Thankfully, though, that disunity was about to disappear—in no small part due to Haman’s own machinations.

Upon hearing the death sentence issued against world Jewry, Esther asked Mordechai to “go, gather all the Jews of Shushan and fast... three days.”² Amazingly, as the Megillah describes, Mordechai was successful in implementing this three-day fast! Now, fasting is not the most popular observance. But when one adds to the physical discomfort the fact that, as the Talmud calculates, this fast overlapped the opening day of Passover, one begins to see how easy it would have been for many to rationalize their rejection of this decree: “What, the Rabbis want me to skip the Seder? The Biblical mitzvah of eat-

1 Esther 3:8

2 Esther 4:16

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ing matzoh? The mitzvos of Maror and the Four Cups of wine? The *Shulchan Oreich* feast we always claim we’ll be too full to eat after all that matzoh and maror, yet manage to consume just fine!”

If ever there was a Rabbinical edict the community could have felt comfortable dismissing, for “religious” reasons, no less, it would have been this demand for a three-day fast. But everyone fasted. We responded to the call to “gather together.” Our bodies, the half of our selves that differentiate us from each other, were temporarily “abandoned” while our souls, which all stem from the same spiritual root, united in prayer. A newly-united Israel laid the spiritual foundation for their salvation.

Disunity provided Haman with his wicked hopes; unity undid his evil plans. We would therefore expect our annual reliving of the Purim salvation to include tools for creating greater unity. And in fact, this seems to be the case. We will briefly cite some examples:

Reading the Megillah

One can fulfill the basic mitzvah even in private but there is a very strong stress on attending a public reading. In fact, it is rather unique to Purim that informal places of worship are encouraged to disband to allow for multitudes to gather in the established synagogues for the Megillah reading.

Sending Mishlo’ach Manos (gifts of food to friends)

Clearly this mitzvah is designed to generate camaraderie and closeness.

Giving Matanos L’evyonim (monetary gifts to the poor)

Note that this is not *tzedaka* in its classic sense. *Ma’aser* funds (the tithes of our income) may not be used for these “gifts.” Standards of determining who is fit to receive charity are relaxed for these gifts as well. It seems we are expected to function in a mode of good will and benevolence unbounded by normal *tzedaka* guidelines.

Drinking Wine

It does not take much imagination to recognize how barriers break down—grudges are forgotten and social “walls” crumble—when parties are “under the influence.”

Wearing Costumes

Although a variety of reasons are suggested for this very curious custom, it is possible that we can unmask another. When masquerading as something other than ourselves, we shed the social-strata barriers and cultural dividers which influence our social circles. If today I, myself, am not “me,” then tomorrow I ought not be disturbed that you are not me! This is one more tool that breaks down dividing walls and allows for greater unity.

Observance of Shushan Purim

This may seem like an ironic, “dis-unifying” twist. Of all holidays, only Purim is celebrated on two different days by different communities! Those living in ancient cities which had walls surrounding them in the time of Joshua’s conquest of the land of Israel (e.g., Jerusalem and Damascus) celebrate on Shushan Purim, the day following “regular” Purim. Although this may be seen as a challenge to unity, it’s possible it is quite in keeping with our theme. The very notion of a “walled city” implies a unity among all inhabitants. Like it or not, they are all bound together by the city walls. And walled cities are given a special place when it comes to Purim. Shushan Purim is celebrated on the fifteenth of the month—the day of the month most conducive to Jewish celebration (Passover, Tu B’Av, Sukkos, and Tu B’Shvat are all fifteenth-of-the-month holidays). In a sense, Shushan Purim, celebrated on the fifteenth, is the “ultimate” Purim. When the rest of us celebrate on the fourteenth and leave the fifteenth for the residents of walled cities, we are in fact affirming that the goal is total unity.

THE SECOND POINT IN HISTORY WHERE OUR ABSOLUTE unity is noted was actually much earlier. As we gathered at Mount Sinai, the Torah describes the scene as follows: “Israel camped [*vayichan*, in the singular] there, facing the mountain.”³ Considering we are taught that there were several million men, women, and children present, the use of the verb in the singular is puzzling. Noting the odd grammar, the Talmud explains that the entire nation of Israel was “as one man, with one heart.” Not only unified because of joint purpose—“one heart”—but even prior to the “one heart,” we were, fundamentally, “one man.” This unity served as a merit and a critical

ingredient in our being worthy recipients of Torah.

It is no coincidence then, that the second major display of Jewish unity lays the foundation for the holiday of Purim. As the Talmud describes, upon witnessing the miraculous Purim salvation, the Jews reaffirmed their desire for G-d’s holy Torah. With unified devotion to G-d, they completed, and to a degree enhanced, *Kabbalas HaTorah*, the very acceptance of the Torah at Sinai.

The holiday of Purim and the historic gathering at Sinai to accept the Torah share positions of unique achievement in Jewish unity. In both cases, that unity provided the potential for our bonding with The One and Only through His absolutely unique Torah. But these occurrences are not meant to be viewed as aberrations. Unity is fundamental to fully receiving the Torah, and G-d describes Israel and Torah as “one”—Torah and Israel are the most natural fit, so unity must be within our reach. We achieved it before and we can get there again. Let us make proper use of the various Purim mitzvos and customs and thereby generate lasting unity.



3 Exodus 19:2

Who is Amalek?

Our Fight Against Amalek Today

IF SOMEONE WERE TO ASK YOU, “WHO IS AMALEK today?” you would hesitate to offer a definite answer. There are differing opinions as to who or what Amalek is today. Is Amalek a biological descendant of his ancestor, or is it a character trait that we are looking for? Is Amalek the same as the one that we encountered when we left Egypt, or has he perhaps taken on a different form?

Rav Yitzchok Hutner,¹ of blessed memory, used to invoke the words of the Ramban (Nachmanides) when discussing the Amalek of today. Ramban says that “Amalek was the first one and he will be the last [whom we will encounter on the road towards the ‘End of Days,’ i.e., the Messianic age].” Rav Hutner, who passed away in 1980, proclaimed for decades that the Amalek that we are encountering in the modern period is the same one that we encountered throughout the generations, albeit in a slightly different form.

The Torah states regarding Amalek, “*asher korcha baderech*,” which in translation means, “Who encountered you on the road [when you left Egypt].” Rav Hutner expounded on this idea of “*baderech*, on the road.” He said that Amalek is always there to “encounter” or—more accurately—to confront the Jewish people when they are “on the road” or en route to attaining a new level or accomplishment. The first scenario of this was the first encounter with Amalek when the Jewish people were leaving bondage in Egypt and they were “on their way” to receiving and accepting the Torah at Mount Sinai. Amalek was the first and only nation willing to confront the Jewish people at this time, while the rest of the world (which had just witnessed the open miracles that G-d had performed for them, including the exact-

ing retribution that G-d had meted out to Pharaoh and the Egyptians) shuddered in fright. Amalek did not want to allow the Jewish people to complete the first part of their journey out of Egypt, which was the accepting of the Torah.

Similarly, Amalek was there again when the Jews wanted to enter the land of Israel, establish a kingdom, and build the Temple. In the days of Esther and Mordechai, in the story of the Megillah, Haman, a descendant of Amalek, was similarly there to try to obstruct the rebuilding of the Temple. And again, as stated in the Ramban brought above, Amalek is here when the Jews are completing their stay in the exile and headed towards the “Days of the Messiah.” Who, then, is this Amalek that has been a thorn in our side throughout the generations, and what is the common characteristic that we see in Amalek that is so alien and threatening to our existence and to the completion of our collective destiny?

Our Rabbis teach us that “*hakol biy'dei shamayim chutz miyir'as shamayim*—everything is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of heaven.” What does this concept mean?

Maimonides teaches us that to try to understand the age-old conundrum of how human free will and Divine omniscience can co-exist, one must study those areas of Torah about which it is said, “My thoughts are not like your thoughts.” That means we can never fully comprehend how these two ideas work together. It is an area which only G-d Himself understands. However, we do know that both of these concepts exist and are true.

In regard to the concept of free will, Maimonides himself writes that it is the basis and root upon which all of Torah stands. He says that “free will and choice are given to man, whether to be righteous or wicked,” and one should not be seduced into wrongly thinking that he is preordained to do something. However, we still have the saying of the Rabbis that “all is in the hands of heaven besides the fear of heaven,” which seems to imply that there is a lot in the hands of G-d that is beyond our control. How can we reconcile this?

Rav Hutner, in addressing this passage of the Rabbis, explained that the term “fear of heaven” is not merely limited to fear of heaven itself but rather that all of our work in this world, i.e., everything that we do, is “in our hands,” meaning we have free will to do it. We thus have a way to approach this difficult issue, which is that everything that is in our hands to do (or not to do—i.e., all of our decisions of

¹ The late Rosh Yeshiva (dean) of Brooklyn-based Yeshivas Rabbi Chaim Berlin.

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action or inaction) is within the realm of free will. However, everything else is in G-d's hands. (In truth, Rav Hutner says, there is a realm in which everything actually is in G-d's hands, but it is impossible for the human mind to grasp that there are simultaneously two different ways in which G-d conducts his world.)

It is the opinion of Rav Hutner that the original Amalek, mimicking his ancestor Esau (who is compared to a pig by virtue of displaying his single kosher sign, a cloven hoof) contends that it diminishes G-d's glory to say that there exists something which is *chutz miyir'as shamayim*—that is to say, outside of heaven's domain. Amalek argues, in his false piety, that *everything* is in G-d's hands, i.e., there is no free will. "Everything is preordained," and there is neither room nor reason for man to be preoccupied with his decision-making and existential angst.

Rav Hutner also demonstrated this world vision of Amalek from the following, seemingly contradictory approaches, which the Torah takes to the Jews' battles upon leaving Egypt. When the Jews had left Egypt and were facing the Dead Sea, Moses told them, "*Hashem yilachem lachem v'atem tacharishun*—G-d will wage war for you and you will be silent." Rashi explains that to mean that the Jewish people, had nothing to do, not even to pray; G-d would take care of the situation. On the other hand, after the Splitting of the Sea, the Jews were safely en route towards accepting the Torah when they were confronted by Amalek. In this case, we see many preparations for war, a very hard-fought battle, and extensive prayer—so much so, that Moses himself had to be seated on top of the mountain, his hands supported by Aaron and Chur raised in prayer. If Moses would lower his hands for even an instant, "*vegovar Amalek*," the tide of war would turn in Amalek's favor. How can we explain these seemingly contradictory ways in which the Jewish people were commanded to wage war with their enemies?

Rav Hutner explained that each enemy had to be fought in exact correspondence to the threat they posed and the ideology which they espoused. Each of these adversaries stood in ideological and practical opposition to the ideals of G-d and of the Jewish nation in their relationship to the precept of "All is in the hands of heaven besides for fear of heaven." The belief that there are two components—that which is in G-d's hands, and that which is in our hands—is one of the fundamental tenets of our faith.

Pharaoh mockingly asked, "Who is G-d that I should listen to His

voice?" and said flatly, "I do not know G-d," indicating that both he and the Egyptian philosophy denied the idea of "All is in the hands of heaven." Therefore, when it came to doing battle against the Egyptians, Moses told the Jewish people, "G-d will fight for you and you shall be silent." G-d was prepared to demonstrate, as He had with the Ten Plagues, that He is Master over all and that He could and would split the sea for the Jewish people. No man-made efforts were required and, indeed, they were discouraged when it came to battling Egypt, so that G-d could demonstrate His complete mastery and control over the world and all that is in it.

Amalek, on the other hand, cried out that "All is in the hands of G-d, and man does not have any dominion over his choices and actions." Commensurate with that false piety, the war against Amalek had to be fought with all the man-made power that we could muster. We had to gather troops, pray extensively and unremittently, and Moses himself "had to work very hard," in the words of the Ramban.

Rav Hutner said that the form in which Amalek will confront us as we endeavor to complete our mission in exile is, and will be, in the question of free will. Rav Hutner's words, spoken in the 1960's and 1970's, seem almost prophetic in regard to what we are witnessing in our time. The onslaught against the notion of free will and self-responsibility comes at us from many arenas and disciplines and is gaining credence. Though the original form of Amalek was cloaked in self-righteousness, with their contention that "All is in G-d's hands," today it comes at us in the guise of permissiveness and the "scientific" ideas that man is a wired and programmed animal, whose behaviors are based on his genetic make-up and are therefore predetermined. Though this idea may seem innocuous at first, it is in fact the ultimate rebellion against G-d, and the ideology against which we have to fight with all our strength until the finish.

Through our fulfilling the commandment of "Thou shall wipe out the memory of Amalek" with all our might and resources, may we come speedily and completely to the time regarding which G-d says, "I will eradicate the memory of Amalek."



Becoming a Holy Drunk

A person is obligated to become inebriated on Purim until he doesn't know the difference between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai."—MEGILLAH 7B

WE ALL WONDER: WHY DOES G-D PERMIT, NAY ENCOURAGE, us to get drunk on Purim? It seems to be such an unholy, un-Jewish practice.

Is all the fun and frolic with alcohol just Judaism's version of a college frat party? Of course, the answer is a resounding "no." No Jewish practice exists that is not replete with profundity and depth. This is all the more true when it comes to understanding such a strange practice as getting drunk on Purim.

If there is one fundamental lesson of the Purim story, it is that while we humans like to feel that we are running the world and controlling our destinies, at the end of the day G-d is behind it all. As the Talmud (Megillah 12a) indicates, the Jews felt they were helping their political relationship with the government by attending King Achashveirosh's grand feast. In reality, their very attendance at the feast was the spiritual trigger for Haman's evil decree to annihilate the Jewish people.

What was Achashveirosh celebrating anyway? He foresaw (incorrectly, of course; see Megillah 12a) that the Temple in Jerusalem would never be rebuilt and the Jews would never again achieve independence.

This is why he paraded at the feast wearing the special garments of the Jewish Temple priests.

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The Jews, for their part, felt they needed to attend the feast and feared Achashveirosh's reprisals if they would boycott it. This made good political sense to them. Mordechai warned them not to go, but they ignored his advice (Esther Rabbah 7:18).

Essentially, the Jews were attending a celebration of their own demise, and they engaged in unholy behavior at the feast. The Jews had given up and thought Achashveirosh's assumptions of their downfall were probably right. Hence, they were deserving of the decree of their own destruction.

Only when the Jews turned to G-d, recognizing that all of their plans only brought forth disaster, did the salvation blossom.

When they fasted for three days and nights, praying and repenting, they realized that only G-d could bring their deliverance.

In the words of a popular Chassidic song by Mordechai ben David (based on Sotah 49b): "We are believers, descendants of believers, and we have no one else to rely on, except our Father in Heaven."

Crumbling Pillars of Security

Our modern experience is surprisingly similar. If there is one lesson of the past few years, it is exactly this point: "We have no one else to rely on, except our Father in Heaven!"

First we thought that our finances and money were secure. The '90's "new Internet economy" and the ever-expanding marketplace were the mantras of the day. Books were written with titles like *Dow Jones 20,000* and stocks kept climbing, with no end in sight. Amazon was \$400 a share, Yahoo \$300, AOL \$200. Everybody who was anybody was trading stocks. Day trading firms were booming.

And then everything crashed. The year 2008 brought the worst stock market since the Great Depression.

Meanwhile, as we thought Israel had finally achieved some semblance of peace with the 1993 Oslo accords (at least a superficial, on-paper one), the devastating violence begun in 2000, with hundreds and hundreds of injuries and dead, showed us differently.

We thought we could rely on the powerful United States military and intelligence to secure our existence. Then came September 11, 2001, and a whole new, seemingly impossible-to-stop wave of terrorism. We are in the midst of a long, protracted war against Islamic terror, a war that will at best take years and years to win.

Our fears and insecurities are here to stay.

So if we can't rely on our money and we can't rely on our military might, what can we rely on? The only answer is our Father in Heaven. Of course, we must make our own efforts to the best of our abilities. G-d will not help us if we lie in bed waiting for Him to act. But the twenty-first-century mind realizes all too well that it is a mistake to think we are in control of our security and destiny.

Holy Intent

This is what getting drunk on Purim is all about. How? Consumption of alcohol makes a person lack normal inhibitions.

Someone who gets drunk in a lewd, wild environment will most likely lose inhibitions in lewd and promiscuous ways. This is forbidden. But if someone consumes alcohol in an environment of Torah and spirituality, with intent to grow from the experience, he will be able to become more holy. (There is clear agreement among all halachic authorities, however, that anyone who gets drunk on Purim without holy intent has no *halachic* or religious basis in doing so.) We are not used to thinking along these lines, but many who have done so successfully can tell you that it is true nonetheless.

A person is obligated to become inebriated on Purim until he doesn't know the difference between "cursed is Haman" and "blessed is Mordechai." (Megillah 7b) The key of this Rabbinic injunction is that we should reach a point of "*lo yada*"—we do not know, only G-d does. We cannot control, only G-d can. This is similar to the way the Jewish people showed trust in G-d at Mount Sinai, stating, "*Na'aseh v'nishma*—we will do and listen," to whatever G-d commands, because we trust and know that He has our best interests at heart. So, too, did the Jews of Purim express the realization that there is only one Being whom we can truly and fully trust, and that is G-d.

In fact, the Jews' realization in the days of Mordechai was on an even higher level. For while the Sinai experience was characterized by fear and awe, the Purim experience was one of drawing close to G-d through love. "*Kiy'mu v'kiblu*," the Megillah tells us: The Jews in the days of Mordechai accepted G-d's word in a way they never had before. (See Shabbos 88a.) On Purim, when we become drunk, we are saying that ultimately we don't even have enough faculties to know the difference between one who is cursed and who is blessed. We try to do what seems correct, but we realize that it is only G-d who knows what is right for us. And only He controls the world.

If we can keep this in mind while in an inebriated state, and if we sing songs stressing these ideas at our Purim feast, we can hopefully carry this higher level of trust and belief in G-d on, into all aspects of our lives.

It seems a bit funny, but getting drunk on Purim can be a spiritual experience.

Lchaim!



A Method to the Madness

YOU ARRIVE AT YOUR GOOD FRIEND'S HOME ON PURIM day with a beautiful Shalach Manos package. You respect this friend for his refined qualities and pleasant demeanor. He is calm and collected—a true role model. You climb to the top of the staircase and politely knock on the door. He opens the door smiling broadly and welcomes you with a warm blessing... But something is off. His eyes are glassy, his clothes smell of alcohol and he seems a bit unsteady on his feet. He has been drinking! As you stand there with your mouth wide open, you wonder: “What is going on here?” But rest assured, you are not alone!

The Chofetz Chaim¹ asks this question as well. Why do we celebrate the holiday of Purim with the strange and seemingly inappropriate practice of drinking wine even to the point of inebriation—when throughout the year this behavior is severely discouraged? Why is this day different than all other days of the year? The Chofetz Chaim answers² that because the miracles of Purim were brought about through parties and wine, we drink to remind ourselves of the central role that wine and parties played in the miraculous events of Purim.

Queen Vashti was dethroned and our Queen Esther crowned as a result of King Achashveirosh's grand and infamous party. Haman suffered his downfall and eventual hanging through the clever soirée arranged by Queen Esther with King Achashveirosh. These various wine-centered events led to Mordechai replacing the wicked Haman. However, we can still ask: Is drinking truly necessary? Wouldn't it be enough just to say a special prayer recounting all of the miracles of

1 Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (1838-1933)

2 *Bi'ur Halacha* 695, “Ad D'lo”, citing *Chayei Adam*

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Purim, or maybe place special emphasis in the Megillah reading on the miracles that took place through banquets and wine?

A comment by Rabbeinu Chananel³ may shed some light on the practice. The Torah (Leviticus 23:43) states “*U'ma'an Yaydu Dorosaychem*,” that we should sit in the sukkah so that our future generations know how we dwelled in huts in the desert after the Exodus from Egypt. Rabbeinu Chananel explains that in future generations, when our children watch us build huts and leave our houses to sit in these booths for the Sukkos holiday, they will ask: “Why are you doing this?” In response, their fathers will tell them the story of the Exodus from Egypt, and how G-d gave us shelter in booths.

The Rabbeinu Chananel's words about Sukkos are strikingly similar to how we know Passover unfolds. Isn't this exchange between father and son reserved for Passover on the Seder night? Isn't this the dynamic of the four questions of the “*Mah Nishtana*,” where the child asks the father why this night is so different from all other nights?

There is a powerful insight that we can take from this Rabbeinu Chananel. We transmit our tradition to future generations by fomenting and responding to questions. We educate by engaging and interacting. We pique our children's interest to stimulate those probing questions that we hope help them make sense of their world. And, most importantly, we prepare ourselves to respond, with answers from our traditions and teachings rendered relevant by their questions. Ultimately, the core of our education is experiential. While book learning plays a most prominent role, rich experiences of Torah and mitzvos provoke questions and foster an ongoing dialogue between parent and child. That dialogue makes room for our teachings and traditions in the lives of our children and ourselves.

The quintessential example of this principle is the Passover Seder night, where almost every action and sentence is intended to draw out discussion. From the four outright questions to the numerous unique customs of the evening, the Seder night is teeming with opportunities to engage our children and deepen their Jewish identity through open, honest, and two-sided discourse—but it doesn't stop there.

Every mitzvah we observe is an opportunity to engage our children. A person could go outside on his own to build his sukkah and probably accomplish it far faster and with much less fanfare, but we

3 990–1053 CE; commentary to Sukkah 2a

choose to include our children (bring on the fanfare!), and thus begins a dialogue that has been thriving in Jewish homes all over the globe for over two thousands years. It all starts with a child's simple questions: "Daddy where are we going? What is a sukkah? Why are we building it?" These are the basic questions which make fertile ground for the transmitting of the history and mission of the Jewish people.

An underlying theme in both Passover and Sukkos, and indeed in many mitzvos, is inspiring our children to ask the questions that will begin a dialogue, to pass on our history and tradition in a vibrant and enduring way. How do we inspire these questions? We inspire questions by catching their attention. We arouse interest by setting that day or that action apart from everyday routine. We promote dialogue by tapping into their natural childhood curiosity and inquisitiveness. The lessons of Passover and Sukkos would not pass as strongly or effectively if there were simply an extra line in our prayers and maybe a Kiddush ceremony to commemorate the holidays. The numerous and unique customs of Passover and Sukkos are not simply to commemorate past events but also to stimulate discussion of those events and how and why they are relevant to us today.

When we turn to the miracles of Purim, we find that much of the Divine intervention (the rise of Esther and the fall of Vashti, the ascent of Mordechai and the demise of Haman) took place through wine and feasting and the constant Divine providence throughout. Why not simply mention in a prayer the significant role wine played in Hashem's chain of events? Ah, but that would do little towards our ever-present goal of arousing our children's curiosity, and indeed our own curiosity, to explore our rich heritage, relationship with G-d and ultimate purpose. In contrast, when young children see their fathers imbibing with uninhibited enthusiasm—behavior which is beyond the norm—they will inexorably be drawn to ask, "Why?" And once again, a valuable opportunity arises for us to revisit the masked miracles of Purim—and the faith and knowledge that G-d is always there for us, if well-hidden, in the celebrations of the wicked; never is all hope lost.

And so we drink, in order to startle ourselves and our children out of complacency, so that we will remember the miracles of Purim and G-d's hidden hand through questions and answers and open dialogue. Sometimes what's up is down and what's down is up. There is a method to the (seeming) madness! Happy Purim! And bottoms up!



Rabbi Eli Polsky

The Flagship Holiday

Of Our Times and for Our Times

Therefore, behold, days are coming—the word of G-d—when people will no longer swear, "As G-d lives, Who brought the Children of Israel up from the land of Egypt," but rather, "As G-d lives, Who brought up and brought back the offspring of the House of Israel from the land of the North and from the lands wherein He had dispersed them."—JEREMIAH 23:7-8

In the future [i.e. in the days of the Messiah] all holidays will be nullified, with the exception of Purim.—MIDRASH SHOCHER TOV

FASCINATING. OF ALL THE HOLIDAYS, IN THE END, PURIM is the only one that will remain standing.

What advantage, in particular, does Purim hold over the rest of the holidays?

Assuming, for a moment, that Purim does, in fact, have an advantage over Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, Purim also has a disadvantage that would far outweigh any advantage it has. Compared to all of the aforementioned holidays, *Purim is the only holiday that is not mandated by the Torah!*

How dare it enter our minds that a Rabbinically mandated holiday trump all of the holidays commanded by G-d Himself!

IT'S SUCH A COMPLEX HOLIDAY. TO BEGIN TO APPRECIATE it, we need to dig beneath the surface of the primary source of Purim, The Book of Esther.

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...In those days, when King Achashveirosh sat on his royal throne which was in Shushan the capital, in the third year of his reign, he made a feast for all his officials and servants... for a hundred and eighty days... And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a seven day feast for all the people who were present in Shushan the capital... The drinks were served in golden vessels... On the seventh day... he told... the seven chamberlains... to bring Queen Vashti... to show off to the people...—Esther 1:2–11

First, a caveat: The Book of Esther is part of *Tanach*.¹ It is an axiomatic belief in classical Jewish thought that *Tanach* is comprised either by the very word of G-d Himself or by Divine inspiration to human authors. This means that there is not even one unnecessary letter in the entire Book of Esther. Further, the Talmud states that any event in the entire Book of Esther, from the first verse to the last, was essential to the Purim miracle.

Having established this, a more than rudimentary reading of these verses raises a number of questions:

- Why “his royal throne?” Who else in Persia had one?
- Why does it mention his royal throne “in Shushan?” Did he have a throne elsewhere?
- Similarly, why does the verse stress the word “capital?” Where else would his royal throne be?
- In general, what is the purpose of the verse that tells us the details of when and where this happened? Let the verse just start with “In the third year of his reign, he made a feast.” It seems that there is no gain to our understanding by giving us such unnecessary background information.
- What, exactly, was so significant about him sitting on his throne that it prompted him to throw a party? And if, for some reason, this was a significant event, why did he wait until his third year to throw the party?
- What prompted two parties?
- Normally, if one were to throw two parties, he would throw the general party first, and then have it morph into the more intimate party. In this case, Achashveirosh first made

a special party for his officers, and then made a party for the general population of Shushan. Why did he switch from the more logical order?

- What compelled Achashveirosh to show everything off (gold, silver, royal vessels, exotic linens, wife, etc.) at this party?
- Most importantly, what is the purpose of these verses in the first place? Why does the Purim story begin with this incident—a seemingly trivial royal feast?

Listen, please, to the interpretation of the Vilna Gaon² as he weaves many midrashim together to reveal to us the fascinating background of the story.

INITIALLY, THE CAPITAL OF THE PERSIAN EMPIRE WAS IN Babylon. When Achashveirosh became the king, he heard about a splendid throne—the throne of King Solomon. On each step up to this throne, a total of 144 golden animals—such as lions, bears, and eagles—stood on either side. When King Solomon stepped up to the first step, the animal positioned on that step miraculously took hold of his foot and lifted him to the second step where the animal from that step would do the same and so on and so forth. When King Solomon finally got to his throne, a pair of golden eagles would fly down and place his royal crown upon his head.

This is truly a prize fit for a king! Especially one such as Achashveirosh, who had just become emperor of the world. There was only one problem: when previous kings attempted to “try on” their new throne by mounting it, they discovered that the animals now miraculously rejected them! Instead of helping up their “new owner,” they just kicked and bit him all the way down the stairs! And so Achashveirosh turned to Plan B. He hired the finest craftsmen in his kingdom, in Alexandria, Egypt, to craft him a splendid throne that would replicate King Solomon’s. The finest craftsmen could not perfectly replicate the throne, however, so he reluctantly turned to Plan B of Plan B.

He heard that in some backwater of a village named Shushan, there was a team of craftsmen who would be able to replicate the magnificent throne of Solomon, sans the miracles. And so they were

1 An acronym for the three parts of Scripture—see Appendix, p. 38

2 Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, 1720–1797

commissioned to build the throne. Finally, after three years, his royal throne was ready for *him* to sit upon.

However, Achashveirosh was still in for a rude awakening, for when the craftsmen finished, they discovered that the throne was so huge and magnificent, it absolutely could not be moved to the capital city! And so Achashveirosh decided to move his entire government, and the capital of the entire civilized world, to the throne, in the tiny backwater of Shushan.

Now this was a cause for a celebration! The emperor of the world finally had a throne truly fit for such a king! And so he made a feast that lasted 180 days for all of his officers. After that whole celebration was done, he felt it would only be appropriate to make a mini-feast for all of the inhabitants of his adopted hometown, in order to foster their goodwill. Since the townspeople were unfamiliar with their town's newest and most important resident, he brought out all of his finest royal vessels to show off to the people.

One of the things that he wanted to show off to his new neighbors was his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti. She refused to comply, and, on the advice of Haman, Achashveirosh had her executed in a fit of drunken rage, paving the way for a new queen, Esther, with Mordechai in tow.

That's just scratching the surface of the background. Here, as the inimitable Paul Harvey would say, is "The Rest of the Story."

WHY DID G-D ORCHESTRATE A MAJOR POLITICAL EVENT—the moving of the World Capital—based on such silliness and pettiness (the desire to replicate Solomon's throne)?

In order for the Purim story to happen, G-d needed a number of key players all in one location. Mordechai, Esther, Achashveirosh, and Haman needed to be in one city. Two of the players were in Babylon (the traditional capital), and two were in Shushan. Who should move to whom? Obviously, it is better to inconvenience an entire population of government employees than to inconvenience two righteous people. To fully appreciate this idea, this is analogous to moving the entire city of Washington, D.C. to the town of Lakewood, New Jersey, in order to bring the President into close, constant contact with the head of the Lakewood Yeshiva!³

3 One could ask, why didn't G-d just cause Mordechai to live in Babylon in the first

Perhaps now we can start to appreciate the full magnitude of the miracle of Purim. The *new throne* caused the movement of the capital to Shushan, which therefore forced the king to host two parties, of which one's purpose was to show off the king's wealth and majesty—which included Queen Vashti!—to the local population. This, in turn, led to the execution of Vashti, which paved the way for a local, Jewish girl, Esther, to both step into the role of the queen, and bring along her uncle, Mordechai, who was instrumental in the salvation of the Jews.

It turns out that, indeed, every verse in the Book of Esther is essential to the Purim miracle. Once all of the preparations to the Purim story had been made, it was time for G-d to bring the four major players together. "Come along, Achashveirosh and Haman. We're moving to Shushan!"

YET WE STILL HAVE BARELY BEGUN TO SCRATCH THE SURFACE of this miracle. Remember that this all was taking place *outside* the Land of Israel, at a time when the Temple was *destroyed*—that is, at a time when G-d was angry with the Jews. Until the story of Purim, there had never been a precedent in history wherein G-d showed favor to the Jewish people—for seemingly no good reason—at a time when they were without a Temple, outside of the Land of Israel.⁴

Where is Esther alluded to in the Torah? In the verse that states, "And I shall surely hide (*haster asteer*) My face from them on that day" (Deuteronomy 31:18).—TRACTATE CHULLIN 139B

Although His face surely is hidden, His hand is yet stretched out above us.—TRACTATE CHAGIGA 5B

Why does the Talmud seek to find an allusion to Esther in the

place? The answer is that in order for the Purim story to unfold, none of the royal officers could know of Mordechai's relationship to Esther (and by extension, her Jewish heritage), and this could best be arranged away from the royal capital. G-d certainly had every detail of the plan hammered out!

4 In fact, at the time that the two were plotting against the Jews, Achashveirosh raised an objection to Haman. He said, "The Jewish G-d is known to be a powerful and vengeful G-d, and history has proven that He looks upon those who seek to destroy His people with a jaundiced eye." Haman reassured him with this very idea. He responded, "That has only been proven at a time when the Jews were in Israel with their temple. However, they have sinned, they are in exile, and their temple has been destroyed, all indicating that their G-d will not shield them." (Midrash)

Torah more so than any other righteous person in *Tanach*? Precisely for the aforementioned reason: It did not make sense, historically or logically, that G-d would be with the Jews in their exile.⁵ And yet He was. On this the Talmud asks, “Where do we see a precedent in the Torah that G-d is with the Jews, even in their exile—that is to say, even when it is not apparent that He is with them, but He has seemingly abandoned them to the whim of the nations?”

And the Talmud responds with that verse; “*V’anochi haster as-teer*—and I shall surely hide My face from you.” In this verse, G-d is saying, “Precisely at the moment that My face is ‘hidden,’ I will simultaneously ‘hide’ (protect) you under the shadow of My hand; I will send you Esther.” In other words, “I will still perform miracles for you—only now it will be in a hidden manner.”

RETURNING TO THE VERSE WITH WHICH WE BEGAN THIS essay, the Talmud (Berachos 12b) explains that it does not mean that the Exodus from Egypt (and all of the holidays that commemorate it) will be fully forgotten, rather it will just take a back seat to the future redemption. The Talmud compares it to a situation in which someone encounters and prevails over a wolf, then a lion, and then a viper. After each incident, he will certainly tell over his latest triumph at the expense of his earlier ones. So, too, the Talmud concludes, when the Jews will finally be redeemed from this final exile, they will “forget” about the earlier redemption (from Egypt), and only tell over the tale of the current, amazing redemption.

According to this understanding, the Midrash does not mean that the Torah-mandated holidays will be nullified. Rather, it means that the other holidays will be relegated to second place, if you will, in relation to Purim, which will be the flagship holiday of the future redemption, for there is no holiday that better epitomizes the human condition in exile than Purim does. Although it may be true that G-d says, “I will surely hide My face on that day,” that is precisely the moment when I will send you “Esther,” i.e., a hidden miracle to get you through your particular predicament. Is it any wonder, then, that

this will be the holiday that will commemorate our dark and bitter exile? Will it be at all surprising that we will be able to look back in time, though not seeing G-d’s hand clearly, as we did in Egypt, yet in retrospect seeing it nonetheless? There is, truly, no more appropriate holiday for our times.

By extension, Purim, definitely, is the most suitable holiday of the eventual redemption—may it come speedily.



⁵ This may be compared to the end of a person’s life. The Exodus is comparable to the nation’s birth, the wandering in the desert was their adolescence, the time of the kings and the Temple was their adult life, and the destruction of the Temple and the exile should have been their death throes. It would not make sense that G-d would miraculously resurrect this deathly ill nation.

Renewing Our Vows

I Do... Again

THE DAY HAD FINALLY COME! THE TEN PLAGUES, THE Exodus from Egypt, and the splitting of the Red Sea were all only meant to bring the Jewish people to Mount Sinai, to receive the Torah. After traveling for fifty days through the desert, they finally arrived. Amidst thunder and lightning and with the “mountain hung over their head like a barrel,”¹ the Jewish people took their oath of dedication to G-d and were given his Torah.

The Talmud² relates, however, that their commitment at that time was somewhat incomplete. Since there had been an element of coercion (the mountain over their heads), the Jewish people would always have a disclaimer for their sins. After all, how could they be liable if they never fully accepted the Torah in the first place?³ The Talmud continues that this semi-allegiance was only temporary, it was later fortified in the days of Achashveirosh and the Purim story:

Nevertheless they reaccepted the Torah in the days of Achashveirosh. As it is written (Esther 9:27), “The Jews fulfilled and accepted.” This is interpreted to mean, “they fulfilled that which they had originally accepted [i.e. the Torah at Sinai].”

What is it about the story of Purim that inspired the Jewish people to reaffirm their commitment to G-d and his Torah? Why wasn't this the reaction of the Jewish people to any other event or miracle in

1 Talmud, Shabbos 88a

2 Ibid.

3 See Chasam Sofer's commentary, which explains the meaning of “they didn't fully accept the Torah at Mount Sinai.”

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their rich history?

The Three Pillars

If a chair has four legs and one leg is removed, its balance may be compromised but the chair will still be able to stand. If, however, the chair only has three legs and one is removed, it will topple to the ground. This very simply illustrates how three legs are interdependent, each not being able to function without the other.

We are taught in Avos (1:2) that “The world stands on three pillars: Torah, *avodah* (service—i.e., prayer), and *gemillus chassadim* (acts of kindness).” Using the above analogy of the chair we understand that each pillar has little independent value without the others. They are interdependent, each one supporting the other to make a firm spiritual foundation for our world. Torah enhances *avodah* and *chessed* (kindness). *Avodah* enhances Torah and *chessed*. And *chessed* enhances Torah and *avodah*. If even one would be lacking, the entire structure would tumble. This is because we would not only be missing that one—the others would be incomplete as well.

Torah and Tefillah

Of these three, Torah and *avodah* are particularly associated, one with the other. I would like to focus on the impact one's *avodah* has on his growth, development and connection to Torah.

The sources are clear. In order to succeed in the observance of Torah and its study one needs *avodah*, service of G-d. Three times a day at the end of the Amidah we pray, “May it be your will, G-d... that You rebuild the Temple speedily in our days and give us our portion in Your Torah.” This prayer is predicated on the assumption that through the temple, the center of *avodah* for the Jewish people, we will be able to achieve and receive our portion in Torah.⁴

In our generation, we may not be able to serve G-d through the Temple and sacrifices. What we do have as a substitute is *tefillah*, the ability to pray.

R' Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz, the Chazon Ish, once wrote in a

4 It's interesting to note that specifically when Moshiach comes and the third and final temple will be rebuilt, the world will come to an unprecedented level of awareness and understanding of G-d and his Torah. As it says in the verse, “The land will be filled with knowledge of G-d, as water covers the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

letter,⁵ “*Tefillah* is the mighty staff in each person’s hand... Torah and *tefillah* are intertwined one with the other. Toiling in Torah brings out the light of *tefillah* and *tefillah* assists in Torah.” The effort that the Chazon Ish personally put into his own Torah study is legendary.⁶ Despite this, he testified about himself that the one thing he put more effort into than his Torah study was his effort and focus on his *tefillah*. Based on his own letter above, it makes sense, then, that he became known as one of the greatest sages of the last generation. His lofty *tefillos* propelled him to even greater levels of Torah knowledge.

On this note, R’ Baruch Ber Levovitz at his Purim meal in 1932 sang the following Yiddish couplet in a *gramman*:⁷

Far vos hobben di Rishonim zoicheh geven tzu azah havanah?
Veil zei hobben gedavent b’kavvanah!
 Why did the early commentators merit such clear understanding
 of Torah?
 Because they prayed with focus and intent!

The point is clear: To excel in Torah one needs to pray. How are we to understand this phenomenon?

Two Approaches

The most basic explanation for why success in Torah is dependent on *tefillah* is that success in *everything* is dependent on *tefillah*. The source for *siyata di’shmaya* (heavenly assistance) in life in general and in Torah specifically, and the key to receive G-d’s blessings is *tefillah*. G-d may have great Torah insight and knowledge in store for us, but it is locked behind the gates of wisdom, which only *tefillah* can unlock.

When the great Chasam Sofer (R’ Moshe Schreiber) was asked the secret to his success in raising a child as great in Torah as his son, the K’sav Sofer, he responded, “Do you know how many tears went into praying for my son?”

There is another explanation, however, that brings out the exclu-

5 *Koveitz Igros Chazon Ish* 1:2

6 It is told about the Chazon Ish that one morning he was found sleeping with his knees on the ground and the upper part of his body on his bed. When asked why he was sleeping in that position, he related the following. “Generally I learn each night until I have no strength left to proceed. I only leave enough energy to get into bed. Last night I miscalculated!” (*Ma’aseh Ish* Volume II, p. 60)

7 *Reb Baruch Ber*, p. 581. A *gramman* is a humorous song, sung to a traditional tune.

sive and intrinsic connection between Torah and *tefillah*. The formula is as follows: When one is praying he is in an intense state of closeness to G-d.⁸ It is this closeness itself that leads to progress in Torah learning.

Rav Aharon Kotler explains:

The parameters of this matter are clear. Success in Torah is dependent on closeness to G-d. The closer one is, the more receptive he is to accepting that which he learns. Just as in the past, G-d taught Torah to the Jewish people in a state of closeness as He descended on Mount Sinai, so too today, G-d is still constantly teaching Torah to the Jewish people in a state of closeness. And therefore the closeness of man to G-d through *tefillah* assists greatly in his Torah learning.⁹

This would explain the emphasis the Talmud (Berachos 8a) places on the added benefits of praying and learning in the same location. A place that has brought so much closeness to G-d through prayer will certainly be a more propitious location for success in Torah learning.

The Purim Salvation

Haman arranged for Achashveirosh to issue a decree of destruction against the Jewish people. The Jewish people needed to act quickly and come up with a method of defense. Mordechai realized that their only hope was to pray. Why was praying the specific solution to counter this evil decree? Why was this the strategy rather than physical battle, as in the Chanukah story?

R’ Chaim Friedlander explains¹⁰ that it was known that the evil decree came upon them as a punishment for attending the festive meals of Achashveirosh. Mordechai understood that the root of the problem was that by connecting themselves to Achashveirosh and his followers they were of necessity distancing themselves from G-d.

8 This reality expresses itself in many of the halachos of praying. For example, the Kaf Hachaim (Orach Chaim 104:6) asks the following question: Why would one not be able to interrupt the amidah if he is in danger of losing a great deal of money? After all, we know that no more than one fifth of one’s income may be spent for the sake of a mitzvah? He answers, that during the amidah we are literally standing before G-d, the King of Kings. The gravity of interrupting a conversation with G-d overrides any other concerns.

9 *Mishnas Rabbi Aharon*, Vol. 1, p. 98, loosely translated.

10 *Sifsei Chaim—Mo’adam* Vol. II p 179. Also see *Koveitz Ma’amarim* of R’ Elchonon Wasserman (p. 562), which gives an alternate answer to this question.

Mordechai knew that the only way to rectify the sin of “distance” was to create a national sense of “closeness” through prayer and fasting.

Mordechai started the campaign himself. “He donned sackcloth and ashes and went out to the city, crying out, weeping bitterly.” (Esther 4:1) He was so focused on his plan that he sent messengers to give guidance to Esther, instead of going to speak to her himself, in order to avoid unnecessary interruptions in his prayers.¹¹ Esther then followed suit, until finally a three-day fast was declared for all of Israel. They were attempting to mend the rift with their newfound closeness through prayer. G-d eventually took heed to their prayers and brought about their salvation.

Reaccepting the Torah on Purim

The Jewish people’s reaction to this miracle was to enthusiastically recommit themselves to the Torah which they received at Mount Sinai. As we asked at the beginning of this essay, why was this their response?

Based on our understanding of the intimate relationship between *tefillah* and Torah, the explanation would be as follows. Purim was a time of an unprecedented closeness to G-d brought about by an unprecedented increase in *tefillah*. Being that closeness through *tefillah* is the direct cause for an increased connection to Torah, it was only natural that this closeness led to a new, and totally voluntary, commitment to fully accept the Torah. After all, “the closeness of man to G-d through *tefillah* assists greatly in his Torah learning.”

This explains why the Fast of Esther is placed in the Jewish calendar right before Purim, even though the original fast took place a month later in the Hebrew month of Nissan. This was done to be an annual reminder that it was the prayer and fasting that brought about the salvation and the subsequent reaccepting of the Torah.¹²

Conclusion

There is a unique law that applies once a year on Purim,¹³ “[If] anyone extends his hand to request [charity from you], you should

give it to him [even without investigating whether he is worthy].” Our Rabbis point out, however, that on a deeper level this law hints to something much more meaningful. Purim is a time when, if we put out our hands in *tefillah* to G-d, we have a guarantee that we will receive—i.e., our prayers will be answered.

The closeness through *tefillah* on the original Purim was not a singular event. Purim day each year is an auspicious occasion to turn to G-d in prayer and supplication. If we can harness the power of prayer on this day, we will merit having all our prayers answered and we will merit to open up new vistas in our connection to the holy Torah and our ability to fulfill our potential... an annual renewal of our vows.

May we merit that it be the will of G-d to “rebuild the Temple and give us our portion in Torah,” ushering in an era when “the land will be filled with knowledge of G-d, as water covers the seas.”



11 See Vilna Gaon’s commentary to Megillas Esther 4:4

12 This could also explain why Purim always coincides with the Torah portions that talk about the building of the temple. It is another reminder that it was our *avodah* that led to the miraculous redemption of Purim.

13 *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 694:3

Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud

The Writing of the Oral Torah

THESE ESSAYS IN THIS COLLECTION DRAW ON MANY sources, but an attentive reader will note that a good number of them are described as “Mishnah,” “Midrash,” and “Talmud.” The following paragraphs explain what these terms mean, and outline their roles in Jewish tradition.

IN THE SINAI DESERT, THE JEWISH PEOPLE RECEIVED THE Torah. It was given to them in two forms: the Written and the Oral.

The Written Torah (*Torah Shebich’sav* in Hebrew) consisted then of the Five Books of Moses. Later, the writings of the Prophets (*Kesuvim*) and the Hagiographa (*Kesuvim*, such as Psalms and the Five Megillos) were added. Together these three groups of books are referred to with the Hebrew acronym *Tanach* (Torah, *Nevi’im*, *Kesuvim*).

The Oral Torah consisted of explanations of Scripture (for instance, that tefillin—phylacteries—must be black and square), as well as additional and supplemental laws (such as the obligation to light a menorah on Chanukah).¹¹

This second Torah remained a purely oral tradition for many centuries. Eventually, the Sages decided that an outline of this tradition must be composed and written down, to ensure that its transmission would continue undisturbed. The initial phase of this composition ended toward the end of the second century CE, around 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

The central component of that outline is called the **Mishnah**. It contains quotes and legal opinions from sages who lived during

and immediately after the era of the Second Temple. The Mishnah is organized into six series (*sedarim*), each of which contains several volumes (*mesechtos*).

Other teachings of the Sages of this period were compiled in a number of works, the majority of which are called **Midrash**. The Midrash is primarily concerned with explaining and expounding upon Scripture. Some Midrashim cover legal subjects, while others deal with the Biblical narrative, philosophy, and mysticism.

Over the next three or four centuries, two commentaries on the Mishnah were written. Both were called **Talmud**, and both are still studied today. One commentary, the Jerusalem Talmud, was composed by scholars living in Israel. The second, the Babylonian Talmud, became the central body of the now-written Oral Torah. Although many important works have been written in the centuries since (such as *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law), all of them draw on the principles outlined in the Talmud.



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1 See *Meshech Chochma*, Leviticus 23:24.