

One of these Mitzvot is not like the Others

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It is widely acknowledged that three *mitzvot* fulfill the mandate of *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the holiday's miracle: reading the *megillah* on Purim, drinking the four cups on Pesach and lighting the *menorah* on Chanukah. Indeed, these identifications are explicit in the *Gemara* (*Berachot* 14a; *Megilla* 3b, 18a; *Shabbat* 23b; *Pesachim* 108b).^{33 34}

It is therefore startling that we find a number of differences between these *mitzvot*. The first concerns the audience of the *pirsum*. With respect to the *megillah*, it is clear that the requirement is to share the story with fellow Jews. When it comes to the four cups, it similarly appears that we are relaying the narrative to a Jewish audience. However, there are indications that the lighting of the *menorah* “spreads the light” not only to Jews but to non-Jews as well. The Talmud records (*Shabbat* 21b) that one may light the *menorah* until the *Tarmodeans* have left the marketplace. Rashi explains:

The feet of the Tarmodeans: This is the name of a nation, who collected thin branches, and would tarry in the marketplace until the people of the market would return home after nightfall.

רגלא דתרמודאי: שם אומה, מלקטי עצים דקים, ומתעכבין בשוק עד שהולכים בני השוק לבתיהם משחשכה.

According to Rashi, the *Tarmodeans* were a non-Jewish population. Rav Soloveitchik³⁵ infers that according to Rashi, the *pirsumei nisa* of *ner chanukah* is universal in scope; we narrate the story to all humankind. The question begs itself: if all three *mitzvot* are characterized as *pirsumei nisa*, why we do find such a dramatic discrepancy?³⁶

³³ The *Gemara Berachot* 14a also identifies the recitation of *Hallel* as involving *pirsumei nisa*, but we will leave *Hallel* aside for the purposes of our discussion.

³⁴ According to Rav Moshe Soloveitchik (*Harerei Kedem*, Vol. I), it is for this reason that R. Yehoshua Ben Levi mentions only these three *mitzvot* as incumbent upon women, because *af hen hayu be'oto ha-nes*, they too were included in the miracle. The principle of *af hen* is limited to *mitzvot* of *pirsum*.

³⁵ *Days of Deliverance*, pgs. 198-9.

³⁶ A third piece to this puzzle is the *halacha* of *mechirat kesuto*, that a pauper must sell his clothing in order to fulfill certain *mitzvot* of *pirsumei nisa*. This is an exception to the general principle that one need not cede more than one-fifth of his assets to fulfill a positive commandment. This *halacha* appears in the *Gemara* only in reference to the *arbah kosot* (*Pesachim* 108b). Interestingly, Rambam codifies this *halacha* with respect to both *arbah kosot* (*Hilchot Chametz U-Matzah* 7:7) and *Ner Chanukah* (*Hilchot Chanukah* 4:13). Moreover, he never mentions the principle

Additionally, in light of the *pirsum* motif, we might have assumed that all three require a quorum of ten individuals, as a *minyan* generally satisfies the requirement of a *halachik* public gathering. But this is not the case. With respect to the four cups, there is no requirement of a *minyan*. When it comes to *ner chanukah*, we once again find no need for 10 individuals – with the singular exception of the widespread custom of lighting the *menorah* in shul, where the necessity of a *minyan* is widely accepted.³⁷

In sharp contrast, the Talmud (Megillah 5a) addresses the requisite of ten men for *keri'at ha-megillah*. Rav distinguishes between communities that read the megillah on the 14th or 15th of Adar, which do not require the presence of ten men, and the Talmudic-era towns that read the megillah on the 11th through the 13th of Adar,³⁸ which do require a *minyan*. R. Assi, however, maintains that a *minyan* is always necessary, even in a community that reads on the 14th or 15th.³⁹

Rashi (s.v. *bizmanah, she-lo bizmanah, ve-Rav Assi*) and others (*Milchamot Hashem 3a be'Alfas, Mordechai Megilla 782*) ground the requirement of ten in *pirsumei nisa* considerations. Indeed, R. Zerachia Ha-Levi (*Ba'al Ha-Ma'or Megilla 3a be'Alfas*) maintains as a matter of practical *halacha* that one cannot fulfill the *mitzvah* even b'dieved unless a quorum is present, based on the principle of *pirsumei nisa*.⁴⁰ What emerges is that *keri'at ha-megillah* is unique, as only here – not regarding the *menorah* or the four cups – do we encounter the possibility that a *minyan* is required. If the term *pirsumei nisa* truly applies to all three *mitzvot*, why is *mikra megillah* unlike all the others?⁴¹

of *mechirat kesuot* in regard to reading the *megillah*. Arguably, this *halacha* may not apply to *mikra megillah* at all, in which case we might have a third distinction among the three *mitzvot*.

Additionally, *Maggid Mishnah (Hilchot Chanukah)* further indicates that there is a difference between *arbah kosot* and *ner chanukah*, invoking the term “*kol she-ken*” as opposed to “*hu ha-din*” in comparing between these two *mitzvot* vis-à-vis the *mechirat kesuot* requirement. See also *Kesef Mishnah* who critiques *Maggid Mishnah's* invocation of the term “*kol she-ken*.”

³⁷ See *Bei'ur Halacha Orach Chaim 671 s.v. ve-yesh nohagin*.

³⁸ This is the interpretation of Rashi s.v. *she-lo*. See, however, R. Ephraim, cited in *Ba'al Ha-Ma'or 3a be'Alfas*.

³⁹ *Rishonim* debate whether R. Assi's requirement of ten men is a mere preference or a strict requirement. Rashi (s.v. *ve-Rav Assi*) considers this a mere preference, whereas *Tosafot* (s.v. *hava uvda*) implies that this is a strict requirement.

⁴⁰ Another explanation is offered by R. Nissim, who writes (*Chiddushei ha-Ran Megilla 5a ve'af al gav*) that we require a *minyan* because *mikra megillah* is compared to *keriat ha-Torah*, which also requires the presence of ten men. *Hagahot Ashri (Rosh 1:6)* suggests that a practical difference between these two perspectives is whether or not we require the 10 individuals to be *b'nei chiyuva*, individuals who themselves are obligated in the *mitzvah*. If the basis for the requirement of ten is the comparison to reading the Torah, then just as there we require ten individuals who are obligated, so too it would be required for reading the *megillah*. However, if the requirement of ten flows from the principle of *pirsumei nisa*, one might conclude that even one who is not obligated in the *mitzvah* of reading the *megillah* can count toward the *minyan*.

⁴¹ Interestingly, although we assume as a matter of practical *halacha* that one who cannot find ten men may read the *megillah* even without a *minyan* (*Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 690:18*), there is nevertheless a debate whether or not one may recite the beracha of “*ha-rav et rivenu*,” the blessing that follows the *megillah*, without ten. Indeed, the consensus view is that one should avoid reciting the beracha (*Beit Yosef Siman 692 s.v. katuv be'Orchot Chaim, Rama*

I believe that the key to this enigma lies in Rambam's treatment of this topic. Let us begin with his discussion of *ner chanukah*:

(12) *The mitzvah of ner chanukah is very precious. One must be cautious to publicize the miracle and to increase the praise of God and thanksgiving to Him for the miracles He has performed on our behalf. Even one who only receives food from charity must lend or sell his clothing, purchase oil and wicks, and light.*

(13) *One who has only a single coin, and kiddush and ner chanukah stand before him, purchases oil to light the Chanukah candles... for it involves a commemoration of the miracle.*

Rambam Hilchot Chanukah Chapter 4

(יב) מצות נר חנוכה מצוה חביבה היא עד מאד וצריך אדם להזהר בה כדי להודיע הנס ולהוסיף בשבח האל והודיה לו על הנסים שעשה לנו, אפילו אין לו מה יאכל אלא מן הצדקה שואל או מוכר כסותו ולוקח שמן ונרות ומדליק.
(יג) הרי שאין לו אלא פרוטה אחת ולפניו קידוש היום והדלקת נר חנוכה מקדים לקנות שמן להדליק נר חנוכה ... שיש בו זכרון הנס.
רמב"ם הלכות חנוכה פרק ד

Here Rambam presents a classic formulation of *pirsumei nisa*: “to make the miracle known and to increase the praise of God.” Rambam derives from this unique quality of *ner chanukah* that: a) this mitzvah is “extremely beloved,” b) a poor person must be willing to lend or sell the shirt off his back in order to fulfill the mitzvah, and c) the mitzvah of *ner chanukah* precedes that of wine for *Kiddush*.

We now turn to Rambam's treatment of the four cups on the *Seder* night:

(6) *In every generation one is obligated to demonstrate himself as if he himself exited now from Egyptian bondage, as it says, “And He brought us out from there.” Regarding this matter God commanded in the Torah, “You shall remember that you were a slave.” In other words, as if you yourself were a slave, left to freedom and were redeemed.*

(7) *Therefore when one dines on this evening, he must eat and drink and recline in the fashion of freedom. And every individual, men and women, must drink on this night four cups of wine, not less. Even a pauper who is supported by charity – the [community] must not give him less than four cups.*

Rambam Hilchot Chametz U-Matzah, Chapter 7

(ו) בכל דור ודור חייב אדם להראות את עצמו כאילו הוא בעצמו יצא ממצרים ושנאמר ואתנו הוציא משם וגו', ועל דבר זה צוה הקב"ה בתורה וזכרת כי עבד היית כלומר כאילו אתה בעצמך היית עבד ויצאת לחירות ונפדית.
(ז) לפיכך כשסועד אדם בלילה הזה צריך לאכול ולשתות והוא מיסב בדרך חירות, וכל אחד ואחד בין אנשים בין נשים חייב לשתות בלילה הזה ארבעה כוסות של יין, אין פוחתין מהם, ואפילו עני המתפרנס מן הצדקה לא יפחתו לו מארבעה כוסות.
רמב"ם הלכות חמץ ומצה פרק ז

Here, Rambam stresses that the obligation is *le-har'ot* – to outwardly demonstrate – the miracle, for one is meant to reenact the events of the redemption as if they had just occurred. What emerges is that the concept of *pirsumei nisa* as applied to the four cups **differs fundamentally from that of Chanukah**: Whereas in the context of *Chanukah*, the goal is to publicize the miracle to others, in the case of the four cups, the essence of the mitzvah is to re-experience the miracle. For this reason, we are obligated to ensure that the pauper partakes of the four cups like all others.

692:1, *Bei'ur Halacha* s.v. *ela*). This seems to reflect the broader significance of a *minyan* with respect to *mikra megillah*.

We have identified the meaning of *pirsumei nisa* with respect to *ner chanukah* and *arbah kosot*. How are we to define this characteristic with respect to *keriat ha-megillah*?⁴²

To analyze the *pirsum* element as it applies to the *megillah*, let us return to our first question: Why is it that of the three *mitzvot*, only *mikra megillah* likely requires a *minyán*? Perhaps the answer is that **what distinguishes the reading of the *megillah* from all the others is the communal dimension of the *mitzvah***. Thus, the term *pirsumei nisa* in context of *mikra megillah* carries a third meaning: this *mitzvah* is ideally performed in context of a *tzibbur*. And because it is ideally a communal *mitzvah*, the *pirsumei nisa* of the *megillah* is addressed specifically to a Jewish audience, as opposed to the *pirsum* of *ner chanukah*, which, according to Rav Soloveitchik's interpretation of Rashi, aims at any passerby.

Why? **Of all these holidays, Purim is the only one in which the entirety of *k'lal yisrael* played a crucial role in the salvation**. In the case of Chanukah, it was not the entire community that fought the battles and rededicated the Temple, but specifically the members of the Hasmonean family. Regarding Pesach, while it is true that God required the Jewish people to perform an act of faith in sprinkling the blood on the doorposts, there are clear indications that His decision to redeem the Jewish people was more about the promise made to our forefathers or God's kindness than our great merit at the time of the Exodus.⁴³ Thus the role of *k'lal yisrael* is limited with respect to Chanukah and Pesach.

However, in the case of Purim, Mordechai calls upon the entire Jewish community of Shushan to fast for three days and three nights (Esther 4:16). Moreover, many Jewish communities played an active role in physically defending themselves (Esther 9:1-18), and, recognizing the spiritual significance of the military victory, they refused to collect the spoils (Esther 9:10, 15-16).⁴⁴ Remarkably, the *Megilla* indicates that the people themselves declared Purim a holiday (Esther 9:17-20, 23). In fact, according to Ramban, residents of unwalled cities read the *Megilla* a day before members of walled cities because the unwalled cities were poorly protected from the enemy. The degree of Divine providence was therefore greater in those more vulnerable locations. In the years following the miracle, the unwalled cities' residents accepted upon themselves an earlier day of celebration, recognizing the precariousness of their situation and therefore the higher level of gratitude owed to God. This acceptance was subsequently endorsed by contemporary rabbinic leadership:

They saw fit to precede the unwalled cities to the walled cities, for their miracle was greater, and they initiated the mitzvah first to establish for themselves a holiday.

Ramban Megilla 2a

וראו להקדים פרזים למוקפים מפני שהיה
ניסם גדול ושהם התחילו במצוה תחילה
לעשות להם לבדם יו"ט.
רמב"ן מגילה ב.

⁴² It is fascinating to note that in his *halakhic* compendium *Mishneh Torah*, Rambam never clearly invokes the concept of *pirsumei nisa* with respect to *Mikra Megilla*. However, Rambam perhaps alludes to the *pirsum* motif in his introduction to *Mishneh Torah*.

⁴³ See, for example, *Yechezkel* 20:6-10.

⁴⁴ See R. Bachaye *Shemot* 17:14, Ralbag *Shmuel I* 15:6, *B'nei Yisaschar*, *Ma'amarei Chodsh Adar*, *Perek 6*. See, however, *Rashi Esther* 9:10, who argues that the Jews did not collect the spoils so as not to arouse the jealousy of Achashveirosh.

Here too we have an instance of a community enhancing the holiday of Purim by taking the initiative and establishing a day of thanksgiving to *ha-Kadosh Baruch Hu*.

Finally, some maintain that immediately before setting out to battle, the people joined in communal prayer. The *Gemara Megilla* 2a identifies the 13th day of Adar as *z'man kehilla la-kol*, a time of gathering for all. While Rashi (2a s.v. *z'man*) understands that the people came together to engage in battle, *Rosh* (*Megilla* 1:1) quotes *Rabbeinu Tam* as rejecting Rashi and maintaining that on the 13th of Adar – what eventually became known as *Ta'anit Esther* – the Jewish community joined in communal prayer. Thus, according to *Rabbeinu Tam's* interpretation, *Ta'anit Esther* highlights the communal engagement of *k'lal yisrael* in the process of redemption.

For this reason, it makes perfect sense that the *mitzvot* of Purim are intended to highlight the theme of community. Arguably, this motif underlies the *mitzvot* of *matanot la'evyonim* and *mishlo'ach manot*, both of which serve to enhance relationships among various members of the community. Furthermore, as we have demonstrated, the nature of the primary *mitzvah* of Purim, *keriat ha-megillah*, is fashioned after the manner in which the events of Purim unfolded. **Just as the Jewish community played an integral role in the events of Purim, so too we are bidden to read the *megillah* as a community.** As we have seen, the *pirsumei nisa* dimension of *mikra megillah* – in contrast to *ner chanukah* and *arbah kosot* – is specifically constructed so as to accent this communal dimension.

In the merit of our joining together as a community in celebration of Purim, may we witness a time when we no longer need to join together as a community in prayer and self-defense, for we will find our communal shelter beneath the wings of the *shechina*.