

A Life of Giving

Rabbi Reuven Brand

Rosh Kollel, Yeshiva University Torah Mitzion Kollel of Chicago

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A Season of Giving

“If it should please the king, write to destroy [the Jews] and [I will pay] 20,000 kikar of silver” Reish Lakish says, it was clear to the Creator of the World that in the future Haman would take out shekalim for the Jewish people, and therefore He committed [the Jewish people’s] shekalim before his.

Megilla 13b

אם על המלך טוב יכתב לאבדם ועשרת אלפים ככר כסף וגו' אמר ריש לקיש: גלוי וידוע לפני מי שאמר והיה העולם שעתיד המן לשקול שקלים על ישראל, לפיכך הקדים שקליהן לשקליו. והיינו דתנן: באחד באדר משמיעין על השקלים ועל הכלאים.
מגילה דף יג:

This Talmudic passage conveys Hashem's providence in protecting the Jewish people, drawing a creative connection between the shekalim that Haman offered to Achashveirosh and the ones the Jewish people donate annually to the Beit Hamikdash. Hashem orchestrated it such that our donation should precede the offer of Haman. Providence is surely a classic theme of the Purim story, yet we can wonder why does the Talmud focus on this specific episode- the donation of the silver- to present it?

Perhaps the Talmud is underscoring another key, central motif in the holiday of Purim: the notion of giving, which is highlighted by the giving of Haman and the giving of the Jewish people. Giving finds expression in multiple ways throughout Purim, especially in a Halachic context. While we find the celebration of a festive meal and public reading of a text in other holidays as well, the other two Mitzvot of the day- Matanot Laevyonim and Mishloach Manot- are unique to Purim. Matanot Laevyonim, gifts to the poor, is a specific Mitzvah of this day, distinct from our general obligation to disburse tzedakah. The Shulchan Aruch describes one manifestation of this difference:

We don't investigate recipients of [gifts to the poor] on Purim, but rather anyone who extends their hand to receive should be given.

Shulchan Aruch OC 694

אין מדקדקים במעות פורים אלא כל מי שפושט ידו ליטול נותנים לו שולחן ערוך או"ח סימן תרצד

We learn that while the ongoing obligation to assist others financially is tempered by the possibility of inquiring about potential recipients, our giving on Purim is different. It is not subject to these boundaries, and we give to all those who ask.

The mitzvah of Mishloach Manot is a Mitzvah that has no parallel in other holidays or Halacha in general. In truth, it is a curious commandment. Why are we obligated to share food with

others or exchange meals with those who do not need them? Clearly, the emphasis is upon the act of giving, irrespective of the need of the recipient. Halacha requires that on Purim we habituate to the act of giving; this commandment ennobles the giver. Hence, both of these Mitzvot reflect our theme of giving. Yet, we are left to wonder: what about the original holiday of Purim mandates a response of giving?

A Definition of Death

*It was taught: 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses prophesied to the Jewish people, and they did not expand or take away from what was written in the Torah, except for [the mitzvah of] reading the Megilla. How did they extrapolate this? Rabbi Chiyah the son of Abin said in the name of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Karcha, [going] from slavery to freedom warrants singing, and so **from death to life** all the more so.*

Megillah 14a

תנו רבנן: ארבעים ושמונה נביאים
ושבע נביאות נתנבאו להם לישראל,
ולא פחתו ולא הויתרו על מה שכתוב
בתורה, חוץ ממקרא מגילה. מאי דרוש?
אמר רבי חייא בר אבין אמר רבי יהושע
בן קרחא: ומה מעבדות לחירות אמרינן
שירה - ממייתה לחיים לא כל שכן?
מגילה דף יד.

The Gemara presents a rationale for the basis of the institution of Purim founded on intuitive reason; this holiday is a celebration of our transition from death to life. It would seem from the language of the Gemara that in the case of Purim we were in fact considered dead, much as we were actually slaves when we were in Egypt. Although the simple understanding of the comment is that we were faced with death, and not in fact dead, why did the Talmud describe it in this way?

In addition, the cause of this "death" is puzzling. The Gemara in Megillah suggests at first

*Rebbi Shimon ben Yochai was asked by his students, why were the Jews liable for death in that generation? He responded, say the answer yourselves! They said, **because they derived benefit from the banquet of that evil one (Achashverosh).***

Megillah 12a

שאלו תלמידיו את רבי שמעון בן יוחאי:
מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל
שבאותו הדור כליה? אמר להם: אמרו
אתם! - אמרו לו: מפני שנהנו מסעודתו
של אותו רשע.
מגילה דף יב.

While this reason does not seem to be accepted at the conclusion of the Gemara, the glaring question remains. How did the Gemara even consider for a moment that the enjoyment of Achashveirosh's meal would be a cause for the destruction of the Jewish people?¹³

Finally, in attempting to understand the "death" of Purim, we should consider another definition of death: poverty. The Talmud (Nedarim 64b) states that a pauper is considered dead. Here, too, we wonder, why is poverty synonymous with death?

Understanding life

To appreciate a definition of death, one must consider an understanding of life. From a Jewish perspective, life is not defined biologically. Rather, it can be viewed as the ongoing presence of a

¹³ See Maharsha, Megillah 12a s.v. Laasot who suggests that the food and drink at the meal were Kosher, in fulfillment of the Talmud's observation that the meal was to "the wishes of Mordechai."

connection with Hashem, the source of all life in this world. Organic virility does not define life, as the Talmud teaches:

*“And the dead know nothing” refers to **the wicked who in their lifetime are called dead**, as it says “And you wicked one who is to be slain, the prince of Israel” or perhaps from here, “on the word of two or three witnesses shall the dead one be put to death.” Is he not yet alive? Rather he is already considered dead from the start.*

Berachot 18b

והמתים אינם יודעים מאומה - אלו
רשעים שבחיייהן קרויין מתים,
שנאמר: (יחזקאל כ"א) ואתה חלל רשע
נשיא ישראל. ואי בעית אימא, מהכא:
(דברים י"ז) על פי שנים עדים או (על
פי) שלשה עדים יומת המת. חי הוא!
אלא: המת מעיקרא.
ברכות דף יח:

Hence, as long as one is spiritually disconnected, although they may appear alive, they are not considered to be truly living. Every person is endowed with this ongoing, spiritual connection with G-d at birth, just like the world was endowed with life when Hashem created it. This spark of creation and life is explored by Rav Eliyahu Dessler (Israel, 1892- 1953), who examines the origins of life and explains how we can imitate and connect with Hashem, our source of life:

When God created man He made him a giver and a taker. The power to give is the greatest attribute of the Creator of the World, for He is merciful and bestows goodness and gives without receiving anything in return... And this is how man was created, as it says “Man was created in the image of God” for he can be merciful, to do good and to give. But the power to take is what man desires to draw close everything in his reach. This urge is what is called “self-love” and is the root of all evil.

Kuntrus Hachessed Chap 1 p. 32

כאשר ברא אלהים את האדם עשהו לנותן
ונוטל. כח הנתינה הוא כח עליון ממדות
יוצר הכל ברוך הוא שהוא מרחם ומטיב
ונותן מבלי קבל דבר תמורה... וככה
עשה את האדם ככתוב "בצלם אלהים
עשה את האדם" כי יוכל לרחם ולהטיב
וליתן. אבל כח הנטילה הוא אשר יתאוה
האדם למשוך אליו את כל הבא בתחומו.
כח זה הוא אשר יקראוהו בני אדם "אהבת
עצמו" והוא שורש כל הרעות.
קונטרס החסד פרק א

According to Rav Dessler, truly imitating and connecting with G-d is achieved through the Divine attribute of giving. In this way, he explains the verse in Mishlei (15:27): “שונא מתנות יחיה,” (one who despises receiving gifts will live) to mean that one will have life if they give and do not take.

According to this view, Rav Chaim Shmuelewitz (Israel, 1902- 1979, Sichat Mussar 63) explains why an indigent person is not considered alive according to the Talmud. It is not because the pauper does not have that they are not alive. Rather it is because such a person is unable to give that precludes them from being truly alive. One’s inability to imitate the Divinely creative, life giving attribute of giving means that one is tantamount to deceased.

The story of Purim

While there is a lack of clarity in the Megillah itself as to why the Jewish people were deserving of destruction, perhaps we can now piece together several clues.

He that separates himself seeks his own desire, and snarls against all sound wisdom.

Mishlei 18:1

לְתַאֲוָה יִבְקֹשׁ נִפְרָד בְּכָל תּוֹשֵׁיָהּ יִתְגַּלֵּעַ :
משלי יח:א

This verse in Mishlei encapsulates the essence of desire- a solitary existence without concern for others. Pleasure seeking leads one to a self-centered, isolated destination that leaves no room for sharing nor any notion of giving. Hence, desire is the antithesis of giving and, by definition, of life.

Perhaps, the students of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai in the Talmud are implying that the sin of the feast of Achashveirosh was their participation in a gluttonous affair, one that encouraged desire and selfishness. The feast itself was a hedonic event championed by an egotistical king, into whose pleasure seeking value system the Jews were being drawn. Haman's assessment of the Jews at the time may corroborate this suggestion. He describes them as “מפוזר ומפורד”, scattered and disunified. This may signify more than just a geographic reality, but also a spiritual assessment. They were scattered, disparate individuals seeking their own personal interests.

Esther's response in the face of crisis is revealing as well. She responded to the decree with the ultimate act of giving: sacrificing herself and her life by appearing before Achashveirosh uninvited. She charged the Jewish community not just to fast, but “צומו עלי” - fast **for me**, as an act of giving and communal unity. Even the origins of the redemption are rooted in giving, as Esther gave credit to Mordechai for the capture of Bigtan and Teresh, which resulted in Mordechai's triumph over Haman.

Perhaps now we can accept the literal reading of the Talmud's statement about the institution of Purim- that the Jews were saved from actual death. Purim is a story of metamorphosis from a self-centered people to a community of giving. This is truly a transformation from spiritual death, at the feast of Achashveirosh, to life, with the unification and sacrifice of a mutually concerned community. It explains why Purim manifests the notion of giving in such practical ways- to enable us to become alive again each year with our acts of giving in fulfillment of the theme of the Purim story.

We can now appreciate the Talmud's contrast between the giving of Haman and the giving of the Jewish community. We describe Haman as the descendent of Amalek, the spiritual nemesis of the Jewish people. While the Jewish people strive to manifest the energy of giving, imitating G-d's creation of the world, Amalek stands in opposition. Amalek represents the ultimate evil, which Rav Dessler explains as the attribute of taking. Historically, Amalek was the embodiment of evil as it was a parasitic band of nomads, who sought out defenseless tribes and peoples whom they could plunder.

According to the Talmud, Haman presented his offer to Achashveirosh in an ironic and duplicitous manner. Haman suggested that he was willing to give, to adopt the life force of the Jewish nation, to achieve his ultimate goal of taking power, wealth and honor. Hashem responded by noting that the quality of giving was already spoken for by the Jewish people, whose annual giving to the Beit Hamikdash sealed our destiny as a future of life. Each year, in each generation, we have the opportunity to tap into this source of life, the spirit of giving. It is our Avodah- our mission- to celebrate the holiday of Purim with its unique Mitzvot that exemplify this fundamental value.¹⁴

¹⁴ The author is grateful to Professor Leslie Newman for her helpful comments on this article.