

# Collected Insights from members of the Masters of Arts in Biblical and Talmudic Interpretation program at Stern College for Women

## Accepting the Torah through אהבה

Meira Rubin

At the end of the *Megillah*, Mordechai sends books to all Jews, instituting Purim as an annual holiday. The *Megillah* tells us that קימו וקבלו “they established and received” this.<sup>41</sup> The Gemara interprets this as an allusion to the acceptance of the Torah:

*And they stood under the mount [Sinai]: R. Abdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If ye accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.' R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Raba, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.]: [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted long before.*

**B. Shabbat 88a, Soncino trans. e-daf.com**

(שמות יט) ויציבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעה רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. דכתיב (אסתר ט) קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבר. **שבת פח.**

Why, after forcibly receiving the Torah at Har Sinai, did we need to re-accept it on Purim? The Ritva, on that passage in the Gemara, explains that the Torah wasn't accepted at Har Sinai because אין קבלה באונס; if you are forced to receive something, it doesn't count as receiving. Commentators suggest that the revelatory experience of Har Sinai was so profound that accepting the Torah then couldn't be considered accepting it freely. The Purim story, in which God's involvement was hidden, stands in direct contrast to this experience. Mordechai and Esther had non-Jewish names and Jews attended the indecorous party at the king's palace. Assimilation was rampant; choosing to accept mitzvot was an active decision. Rashi on that passage in the Gemara explains that on Purim the Jews accepted the Torah מאהבת הנס שנעשה

<sup>41</sup> Esther 9:27.

להם, due to love of the miracle. They didn't feel the fear they felt at Sinai and this acceptance through אהבה was stronger.<sup>42</sup>

The Maharsha on that passage in the Gemara and the *Torah Temima* in his commentary to Esther (9:27), point out that the language of קימו וקבלו preserves the order and paradox of געשה ונשמע, we will do and then hear: How could we agree to do or establish something, before having heard or received it? According to the Gemara's explanation of accepting the Torah on Purim, this is exactly what happened. Only once we had done the mitzvot, did we receive the Torah. The Maharal writes that the Torah cannot be properly understood without the performance of mitzvot.<sup>43</sup> Sometimes one has to experience the mitzvot in order to truly hear the Torah. Full acceptance of the Torah was more possible on Purim, when we had already experienced the observance of mitzvot. We knew what was in the Torah and had the opportunity to reject it, thus our acceptance was really an acceptance.

The same opportunity presents itself today. HaShem's hidden presence and our experience of mitzvot enables us to accept the Torah with *ahavah* (love).

## True Goodness

### Miryam Spiegel

The word *tov* (good) is featured prominently in the *Megillah* in a variety of contexts. Interestingly, there is a striking contrast between the usage of this word with regard to the members of society in Shushan as compared with its use in reference to Mordechai.

This language of *tov* is featured prominently in requests made of Achashverosh. Seven times, the *Megillah* records such requests, each time including the unique formulation of אם על המלך טוב, if it please the king, or literally, if it is good for the king. One such example may be found in the context of Haman's request to annihilate the Jewish people from the kingdom:

*If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those that have the charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries.*

**Esther 3:9**

אם על המלך טוב יכתב לאבדם  
ועשרת אלפים כפר כסף אשקול על  
ידי עשי המלאכה להביא אל גנזי  
המלך:  
אסתר ג:ט

It may be assumed that this phraseology is meant to place responsibility on the king in making “good” decisions. However, as is demonstrated throughout the *Megillah*, the decisions made by Achashverosh, such as the execution of Vashti following her refusal to attend the *mishteh hamelech*, the king's feast, or the decision to allow Haman to wage war against the Jewish people, embody a value set that seems to be a far cry from the *tov* meant to guide the decisions of the king. In a similar vein, the responses given by Achashverosh to requests made of him by his

<sup>42</sup> This idea is based on lectures I heard at Midreshet Lindenbaum from R. Shmuel Klitsner and Dr. Tamar Ross.

<sup>43</sup> *Derush al HaMitzvot in Derashot Maharal*.

ministers, Haman, and Esther and Mordechai each feature the phraseology of הטוב בעיניך, the good in your eyes.

*And the king said to Haman: 'The silver is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.*

**Esther 3:11**

וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ לְהִמָּן הַכֹּסֶף נָתַן לְךָ וְהָעָם  
לַעֲשׂוֹת בּוֹ כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ  
אֶסְתֵּר ג:יא

Rather than using his throne to assert a responsible leadership, the formulation of the verses suggests a decision-making process based on personal good and individual judgment.

Moreover, as demonstrated in the cases of both Vashti and Ester, the evaluation of women is centered on their “good looks.”

*To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the royal crown, to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was good to look at.*

**Esther 1:11**

לְהִבְיֵא אֶת וַשְׁתִּי הַמְּלֻכָּה לְפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֹתֶר מַלְכוּת  
לְהַרְאוֹת הָעַמִּים וְהַשָּׂרִים אֶת יְפִיָּהּ כִּי טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִיא  
אֶסְתֵּר א:יא

Achashverosh’s wish to display Vashti’s beauty is highlighted during the *mishteh hamelech*. Upon her refusal of the king’s request, and her subsequent removal from the throne, Achashverosh is advised to seek out young women who are "נערות בתולות טובות מראה," young virgins who are good to look at (Esther 2:2).

A critical reading of the *Megillah* suggests a counterintuitive understanding of the meaning of “good.” It is interesting to note that in each of the aforementioned cases, the implication of *tov* comes to reference good that is evaluated for, or in the eyes of, an individual. Whereas the abundant usage of the word *tov* involved with the evaluations and decision-making, aligned with the king, may at first glance have an expectation of universally beneficial decisions, the irony is found in the far-reaching negative consequences of such actions.

The error of Achashverosh’s ways becomes far more evident in consideration of the Biblical command to engage with הישר והטוב בעיני ה', what is right and good in the eyes of G-d (Devarim 6:18). Unlike the trend exhibited by Achashverosh, whose actions and decisions seem to be personally motivated, the Ramban explains on that verse that the Jewish people are mandated to take wider moral principles into account while engaging with the letter of the Law.

In contrast with the *tov* of Shushan, *tov* takes on an entirely different meaning when used in reference to Mordechai. At the end of the *Megillah*, Mordechai is described as אשר דבר טוב על המלך, who spoke good for the king (Esther 7:9). As opposed to the inward focus of the personally motivated *tov* which is displayed by the leadership of Shushan, the *tov* that defines Mordechai references his having stood up for the king against a corrupt society. Such an example of *tov* is one of clear and careful evaluation of moral principles with the ultimate goal of creating a better society. The concluding verse of the *Megillah*, which defines Mordechai as דרש טוב לעמו, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his offspring (Esther 10:3), takes this one step further as the *Megillah* underscores Mordechai’s distinct personality, which serves as a foil to the societal standards of Shushan. Whereas the *tov* that was valued in

Shushan served individual needs, Mordechai himself was defined as a seeker of good- a good that was motivated toward bringing peace to all members of his nation.

The mitzvot observed on Purim may be enhanced through this distinction and understanding of the good that we strive to build in our families and communities. The community gathering for the reading of the *Megillah* is one in which each individual, hearing each word, is significant. By gathering with family and friends at the Purim *seudah* (meal), community ties have the opportunity to be strengthened. In sharing *mishloach manot* and *matanot laevyonim*, the Jewish community renews its commitment to giving to others. Through consciously involving a community-building perspective, and in taking the higher goal of ה'ישר והטוב בעיני ה' into account, the community at large has the opportunity to reflect and build upon the past, and in doing so, each individual has the ability to take the initiative in turning good actions into great ones.

## They, Too, Were Part of the Miracle

Sarah Steinberg

Although women are generally exempt from time-bound positive commandments, the mitzvah to read or hear *Megillat Esther* on Purim is a noted exception. Along with the mitzvot of Chanukah candles and the four cups of wine drunk at the Pesach seder, the reason given is “אף הן” “היו באותו הנס,” that women, also, were part of the miracle.<sup>44</sup> Rashbam<sup>45</sup> explains that women were instrumental in all three of the miracles that precipitated these commemorative mitzvot. The Gemara elsewhere<sup>46</sup> states that “because of the righteous women were we redeemed from Egypt,” and includes a list of the virtuous acts done by the women at that time. A large part of the Chanukah victory is attributed to Judith, who killed the Greek general Holifernes.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the role of Esther in the Purim story is obvious. Rashbam says that because these miracles were so dependent on the acts of women, women have an unusual connection to these mitzvot and are obligated in them, though one might think they are exempt.

Tosfot<sup>48</sup> quotes Rashbam on this matter and rejects his explanation. In Rashbam's view, we have these mitzvot because the miracles were precipitated by the acts of women. However, the language of “they, too, were part of the miracle” implies that the miracles would have happened anyway, but since women were included too, they also take part in the commemoration. Tosfot suggests that a better understanding of this idea is that since, in all of these stories, the women were being persecuted along with the men, the miracles saved their lives just as much as those of the male population. Therefore, women are obligated to take part in these mitzvot that are tributes of praise and thanks to Hashem.

Although much has been written about this topic, I would like to focus on these two approaches. Why would Rashbam, who is tremendously attuned to linguistic nuances in his Biblical

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<sup>44</sup> Megilla 4a, Pesachim 108a-b.

<sup>45</sup> Pesachim 108b.

<sup>46</sup> Sotah 11b.

<sup>47</sup> Shabbos 23a and Rashi “היו באותו הנס”.

<sup>48</sup> Megilla 4a, “שאף הן היו באותו הנס”.

commentary, offer an explanation that is counter to the implication of the words of the Gemara? Is there some reason he didn't offer the same explanation as Tosfot, which seems to be more obvious?

Although I can't guess what Rashbam was actually thinking, it does occur to me that there is a fundamental difference between these two possible approaches. The way Tosfot explain it, these three mitzvot commemorate miraculous acts of Hashem that brought salvation for the entire Jewish nation. Rashbam's view, however, takes into account the human effort involved. Hashem performs miracles for all of us every day, whether we see them or not. How often, though, does the entire Jewish nation rise as one and leave exile or fight for our very existence? By pointing out the unusual contributions of women to these causes, Rashbam draws our attention to everyone's contributions. Hashem did not simply smite the Persian mobs given free reign to kill all the Jews. The Jews themselves had to fight back, and they did. As their neighbors turned against them, they fought, suffered casualties, and surely witnessed some of the worst aspects of human nature. They survived, however, and succeeded in defending their identity.

Obviously, as Tosfot points out, we owe our continued existence as a nation to Hashem. Nevertheless, sometimes Hashem requires effort and action from us. If we indeed put forth that effort, don't we deserve to be proud? Shouldn't we also celebrate the effect these experiences had on our sense of national unity and identity? Is it wrong to look back at our history and use our past victories as a source of confidence and strength in facing modern adversaries?

Again, there is much more to be said about the idea of "אף הן היו באותו הנס," and no one can say exactly what caused Tosfot and Rashbam to write what they did. However, perhaps the thoughts I've laid out here still have some merit. I fervently hope that such calamities never befall us again, but if they do, we know that we have survived in the past, and we can survive it again in the future.

## Why did Mordechai refuse to bow down?

Derora Tropp

When Mordechai refuses to bow, Haman's response seems completely inordinate to the crime. Within the span of a few seconds, Haman becomes scathingly mad and decides to murder an entire nation. Difficulty with anger-management or just plain old anti-Semitism seem insufficient explanations for the wildness of Haman's reaction. Furthermore, why does Mordechai refuse? On a *pshat* (simple) level there is no issue of idol worship whatsoever.

There is no doubt that one prominent theme played out through the *Megilla* is the conflict with Amalek. The nation of Amalek represents an antithesis to everything for which the Jewish people stand. They are characterized by the phrase "*asher korcha baderech* - they happened upon you" (Devarim 25:18). Things just chance to happen with no higher divine plan. They are the type of people who might be prone to casting lots. As the Jewish people stand for the belief in Divine providence, they are commanded to completely and utterly destroy Amalek. King Shaul does not succeed in destroying them and leaves their king Agag alive. Agag just so happens to be

an ancestor of Haman. Where Shaul failed, another member of the family of Kish, from the tribe of Binyamin, namely, Mordechai, is more successful.

However, in order to more fully understand the story of the *Megilla* we must look to an even earlier conflict. Amalek is a descendant of the house of Eisav. Upon closer inspection, the story of Yaakov stealing the blessing from Eisav is full of linguistic and thematic parallels to the story of the *Megilla*. Consider the following:

- Perhaps the most striking example is the almost verbatim repetition of an entire phrase. The description of Eisav crying bitterly over losing the blessing- “*vayiz’ak ze’aka gedola u’mara ad me’od*,” and he cried an exceedingly great and bitter cry (Bereishit 27:34) is incredibly similar to the description of Mordechai’s reaction when hearing Haman’s decree (“*vayitz’ak tze’aka gedola u’mara*” and he cried a great and bitter cry. (Esther 4:1).
- The word “*vayivez-* and he disdained” appears as a description of both Eisav’s attitude toward his birthright and of Haman’s attitude toward only killing Mordechai. (See Bereishit 25:34 and Esther 3:6)
- Both Eisav and Haman are filled with burning anger against their adversaries. Rivka tells Yaakov to run away until his brother’s anger subsides- “*ad asher tashuv chatat achicha*” (Bereishit 27:44) . Similarly the text states explicitly that Haman was filled with anger against Mordechai- “*vayimalei Haman al Mordechai cheima*” (Esther 3:5).
- Finally, both Eisav and Haman concoct secret plans. “*vayomer Eisav bilibo*,” Eisav said to himself (Bereishit 27:41) and “*vayomer Haman bilibo*,” Haman said to himself (Esther 6:6).

These parallels are not direct. No one character lines up exactly with a corresponding character in the other story yet the *Megilla* is quite clearly referencing the story of the stolen blessing. We are meant to read these two stories together.

Let us focus on one theme that occurs in both stories: bowing.<sup>49</sup> As discussed, Mordechai’s refusal to bow and Haman’s inordinate response are obviously key events in the *Megilla*’s plot. The theme plays a less obvious though similarly important role in the earlier narrative. The blessing that Yaakov steals is that other people will bow down to him:

*Nations shall serve you and kingdoms shall bow down to you; you shall be a master over your brothers, and your mother's sons shall bow down to you*

**Bereishit 27:29**

יעבדוך עמים וישתחוו לך לאמים הוה  
גביר לאחיקך וישתחוו לך בני אמך  
בראשית כז:כט

Even though Eisav is the elder, Yaakov gains the upper hand. It is this loss of power that causes Eisav to cry so bitterly. He secretly plots to murder Yaakov and get back his power causing Yaakov to run away to his uncle Lavan’s house. He marries and has children there, all the while unable to return to his parents’ house for fear of his brother’s wrath.

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<sup>49</sup> Food for thought: in both stories characters are commanded by their loved ones (צוה) to hide their identities. Both narratives also develop the themes of the importance of clothing and have people waiting outside in order to be recognized, in order that they are able to make a fancy meal for other people.

When Yaakov finally does return, he does an extraordinary amount of bowing to Eisav. He begins their first meeting by bowing seven times. Then each of his wives and all of his children bow. He seems to be saying “no hard feelings about that whole ‘you have to bow down to me’ thing, okay?” He gives up his right to be the one being bowed to.

The *Midrash* picks up on the fact that there was one member of the family not present at their ceremony of prostration: Binyamin had not yet been born. It depicts a scene in which Haman and Mordechai discuss Mordechai’s refusal to bow.

*What did Mordechai say to them, to those who said “why are you going against the king’s law”? ... “And they told it to Haman etc.” Haman said to them “say to him did his ancestors not bow down to mine? As it says “and the concubines come forward etc. and afterward Yosef and Rachel came forward and bowed.” He answered “Binyamin had not been born yet”. And they told him. That is what it means when it says “and they told Haman”*

**Esther Rabbah 7:8**

מה אמר להם מרדכי למי שאומר  
 לו מדוע אתה עובר את מצות  
 המלך... ויגידו להמן וגו' אמר לון  
 המן, אמרון ליה זקנו הלא השתחוה  
 לזקני, הדא ה"ד ותגשן השפחות  
 וגו' ואחר נגש יוסף ורחל וישתחוו,  
 היתיב ועדיין לא נולד בנימין,  
 אמרין ליה ה"ד ויגידו להמן  
**אסתר רבה ז:ח**

Both parties see the meeting of Yaakov and Eisav as a precedent for the encounter between the two of them. Haman claims that Mordechai must bow because his ancestors did. Mordechai refuses on the basis that *his* ancestor Binyamin did not bow.

Mordechai is not refusing to bow because of his own personal pride. His refusal represents an unwillingness to perpetuate the trend in which sons of Yaakov bow to sons of Eisav. No wonder this is a thorn in Haman’s side! Ever-present in the collective consciousness of the Amalekite people is the notion that they lost the upper hand and will be made to bow down to Yisrael’s children. Mordechai is attempting to return to the power structure dictated by the blessing.

When Mordechai hears that his refusal to bow has led to such a terrible edict, he cries a bitter cry (*vayiz'ak ze'aka gedola u'mara*). Like Eisav, he feels that he has now lost his ability *not* to bow.

Haman, is at first characterized by the root word ל.ג.ג meaning large or great. Like the elder brother Eisav who is also characterized by this word, he thinks that others should bow to him. The *Megilla* tells us of Haman’s promotion through the ranks: *gidal hamelech Achashveirosh et Haman* (Esther 3:1). Haman even describes his own greatness using this root. He tells his friends about “*et kol asher gidlo hamelech – how great the king had made him*” (Esther 5:11). He thinks that his status as the גדול entitles him to power.

The blessing tells us that the younger brother becomes the greater of the two. Perhaps not so ironically, the last scene in which we find Haman alive, he is prostrating himself before Esther. When the tables begin to turn in the story, the root ל.ג.ג begins to occur in conjunction with

Mordechai (see 9:4 and perhaps even 6:3)<sup>50</sup> In fact, in the final chapter of the *Megilla*, which consists of only 3 verses, this root describes Mordechai no less than three times!

Mordechai's lasting legacy is that of being a great man. He reinstates Yaakov's blessing and takes his rightful position as the one to whom others bow. Where Yaakov and Shaul fail, Mordechai succeeds.

The story of the *Megilla* is not one of a localized power struggle between two people but is about a long-standing feud between brothers and the nations they father. It is the story of a Benjaminite hero who does not follow the course set out for him by history. He takes matters into his own hands and resuscitates a national blessing that has lain dormant almost since its inception.

## Why Don't You Send Me Food Every Day?

### *A New Perspective on Mishloah Manot*

Ora Ziring

One of the central obligations on Purim is the mitsvah of *mishloah manot*. Given that most mitsvot require a *berakhah* prior to their performance (*Pesachim* 7b, *Megilah* 21b, etc.) it is striking that no *berakhah* is recited on the performance of this mitsvah. Many reasons have been suggested to explain why this is the case. Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg (*Seridei Esh* 1:61) proposes two unique answers that shed a new light on the nature of this obligation, as well as provide perspective on interpersonal obligations in general.

He first suggests an answer that relates to the intent one must have when fulfilling the mitsvah of *mishloah manot*. He claims that a person should give the gift because they genuinely want to express their love for the person they are giving it to. Giving a gift out of obligation misses the point. Saying a *berakhah* implies that one is only doing the mitsvah because God has commanded it, or with regard to rabbinic obligations, He has commanded people to listen to the halakhic authorities who have in turn created the obligation (*Shabbat* 23a). While it is true that *mishloah manot* is a formal obligation, the core of the mitsvah is the establishment of good will among peers. Friendship is not something that should exist only because it is commanded.

He then suggests an answer based on Rabbi Yitshak b. Mosheh of Vienna in his *Or Zarua* (1:140). The *Or Zarua* explains that a *berakhah* is not required for mitsvot that are not limited to a specific time frame. If a mitsvah can be done at any time, it does not require a *berakhah*. With this, R. Weinberg suggests that the obligation of *mishloah manot* applies year-round. Seemingly, he means that the obligation to maintain good will is constant. Thus, the principle behind the mitsvah is constant, though the particular expression is only required once a year. He compares it to the obligation to hear *Parashat Zakhor* once a year. Even though the specific obligation of hearing the *parashah* applies only once a year, the purpose of that obligation is to ensure that a person will remember the message the rest of the year. Similarly, Hazal only

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<sup>50</sup> It is interesting to note that when Shaul fails to destroy Amalek he is blamed for thinking of himself as being too small- ראש שבטי ישראל - ויאמר שמואל הלא אם קטן אתה בעיניך, And Samuel said, "Even if you are small in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?" (Samuel 1 15:17)

enacted the obligation of *mishloah manot* on Purim, but the purpose of that obligation is to remind us that we should actively promote camaraderie constantly. Thus, he explains, there is no obligation to recite a *berakhah*.

The two answers of Rabbi Weinberg present a novel understanding of the purpose of *mishloah manot*. One day a year there is an obligation to give gifts wholeheartedly in order to create positive relationships with our friends, family, and community. The purpose of this yearly obligation is to remind and inspire us to work on our relationships throughout the rest of the year. *Mishloah manot* should create a genuine feeling of good will that lasts. To objectify and formalize this mitzvah with a *berakhah*, making it something we do only because of obligation would minimize its importance and defeat its purpose.