

What It Means To Be a Jew

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The term Jew is really an English form of the Hebrew word *Yehudi*. What does it mean to be a *Yehudi*? Taking a closer look at Megillas Esther and the holiday of Purim will help shed some light on this question.

The first person in Tanach to be described as a *Yehudi* was Mordechai, one of the heroes of the Purim story.

*There was a man, a Yehudi, in Shushan the capital,
whose name was Mordechai ... a Yemini man.*

Esther 2:5

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וְשֵׁמוֹ מֶרְדֵּכַי בֶּן
יְאִיר בֶּן־שִׁמְעִי בֶן־קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי.
אסתר ב:ה

The Talmud comments on this pasuk:

*"He is called a Yehudi, implying that he descended from Judah;
he then is called Yemini, implying that he is a Benjaminite!
(which one is it?) ... Rabbi Yochanan responds "He was a
Benjaminite. Yet he was called a Yehudi because he rejected
idolatry, and anyone who rejects idolatry is called a Yehudi."*²

Megilla 12b-13a

קרי ליה יהודי - אלמא מיהודה קאתי,
וקרי ליה ימיני - אלמא מבנימין קאתי
... רבי יוחנן אמר: לעולם מבנימין
קאתי, ואמאי קרי ליה יהודי - על
שום שכפר בעבודה זרה. שכל הכופר
בעבודה זרה נקרא יהודי.
מגילה יב:-יג.

Rabbi Yochanan's answer is difficult to understand. Why is someone who rejects idolatry called a *Yehudi*?

Reading the Targum on the pasuk above (Esther 2:5), may help elucidate this. The Targum defines a *Yehudi* as someone who is:

*A man of kindness who thanks/acknowledges³ and prays
before God for his nation.*

גבר חסידא ומודה ומצלי קדמן אלקא על
עמיה.

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² See Rashi 2:3, who has a different way of answering the apparent contradiction in the verse.

³ The specific definition of *modeh* or *hodaah* will be developed in the ensuing paragraphs.

The Targum seems to provide a lot of concepts to describe what a Jew is! How is all this seen in the one word *Yehudi*?

It seems that the Targum's explanation is working off the *shoresh* (root) of the word *Yehudi*, which is *hodaah*, thanks. The etymology of the word *Yehudi* is clear from Leah's explanation for naming her son Yehudah (Bereishis, 29:35): "הַפַּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת ה', this time I will thank God."

The *shoresh* of the name Yehudah, and hence the term *Yehudi*, is *hodaah*.

We usually define the word *hodaah* as thanks. However, it seems that the Targum is expanding what *hodaah* connotes. *Hodaah* does not only mean thanks, it also means admission or acknowledgment.⁴ According to the Targum, a Jew/*Yehudi* is someone who acknowledges God and prays to God due to a recognition and admission that one cannot exist without God. This might explain why our rabbis established that we begin our prayers every day with "*Modeh Ani*," acknowledging God as the source of our lives and thanking Him for another day to live in this world.

Perhaps this is what Rabbi Yochanan means when he tells us that anyone who rejects idolatry, such as Mordechai, is called a *Yehudi*. By denying idol worship and instead acknowledging the existence of God and showing gratitude towards Him, one has earned the right to be called a *Yehudi*, one who recognizes the ultimate Source of existence.

This trait of being a *Yehudi* was not only seen in Mordechai, but in Esther as well. The Mishna in *Pirkei Avos* (6: 6) tells us:

Whoever quotes a teaching in the name of the one who said it, brings salvation to the world. As it says "Esther said to the king in the name of Mordechai... (that Bigtan and Teresh were plotting to kill the king)"

כל האומר דבר בשם אומרו מביא
גאולה לעולם שנאמר ותאמר
אסתר למלך בשם מרדכי.

The Maharal (*Derech Chaim*, 6:6) explains that the Mishna is describing what type of people are worthy of being the messengers of God, the key players for bringing salvation into the world, "*the meivi geulah l'olam*." It is those people who can connect things back to the source; who will quote a teaching in the name of someone else. For if not, explains the Maharal, then there is a possibility that the salvation could be perceived to have occurred without God. There is concern that man will take full credit for the salvation without acknowledging God behind the scenes. Because Mordechai and Esther were people who understood the importance of connecting back to the source, they were worthy of being the messengers of the salvation in the story of Purim. There was no concern that they would forget about God. They were *Yehudim*.⁵

The story of Megillas Esther is a perfect means of teaching us the lessons of being a *Yehudi*. Looking back on the occurrences of the story, we recognize not only God's hand in the process of salvation but also the human initiative that helped facilitate the *geulah*.

⁴ See *Pachad Yitzchak* (R' Yitzchak Hutner), Chanukah, 2:2 for an elaboration on the different meanings of the word *hodaah*.

⁵ See *Matnas Chaim, Moadim*, Pesach (R' Matisyahu Solomon) for an explanation as to why Moshe Rabbeinu, as well, was worthy of bringing salvation.

Perhaps this can explain a strange addition at the end of the song *Shoshanas Yaacov* that we sing after reading the Megillah:

Also Charvona should be remembered for good.

וגם חרבונה זכור לטוב

“Also Charvona,” a man who suggested that Achashverosh hang Haman on the very tree that Haman wanted to use to hang Mordechai, is remembered for good.”⁶

In fact, this special mention is based on the opinion of Rav Pinchas quoted in the Talmud Yerushalmi (*Megillah*, Chapter 3):

Rav Pinchas said, a person must say “Charvona is remembered for good.”

א"ר פנחס צריך לומר חרבונה זכור לטוב.

Why is it necessary to remember and recognize Charvona? Because this is what the holiday of Purim is all about. It is about recognizing that things don't happen on their own and acknowledging not only God, but also those people who make it happen. It is the same *middah* (character trait) of *hakaras hatov* (recognizing the good) that is strengthened each time one recognizes the source of good.

Adopting this attitude of acting as a *Yehudi* and recognizing the source of good, can truly enhance the *simcha* (happiness) of the day of Purim as well. It is well established in the field of psychology that gratitude has been shown to be one of the strongest correlates of emotional wellbeing, and experimental studies have supported the theory that gratitude enhances happiness.⁷

Perhaps it was in the theme of the day of Purim that Mordechai and Esther established the mitzvah of *matanos l'evyonim*, giving to those economically less fortunate. Aside for the obvious benefits experienced by the receiver, this *mitzvah* (commandment) also forces the giver to self-reflect on what one has in his or her life. Giving to the less fortunate allows one to take pause and step outside oneself and to appreciate and recognize the source of one's blessings.

The message of Purim is really reminding us what it means to be a Jew; we can use the day to develop our ability to recognize those people around us who enhance our lives, and of course to recognize God, who is the ultimate Source of it all. Being a Jew, in its essence, on a behavioral level, is to thank, but on an emotional and cognitive level, it is to recognize the source.

⁶ The Talmud, *Megillah* 16b, tells us Charvona was one of Achashverosh's advisors in the plan to kill the Jewish people and therefore knew about the tree.

⁷ Watkins, P. C., Sparrow, A., & Webber, A. C. (2013). “Gratitude: Taking care of business with gratitude.”