

The Origin of *Mishloach Manot*¹

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The Reason for the Mitzvah of *Mishloach Manot*

There are two classic understandings of the *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot*. The author of *Terumat HaDeshen* (*Siman* 111), Rabbi Yisrael Isserlin (Germany, 1390-1460), sees the gifting of food items as a way to ensure that every person has sufficient food for a proper Purim seudah. This would explain why according to the Maharil, *mishloach manot* must be food items that are ready to eat.² If the receiver hopes to make use of *mishloach manot* delivered on the morning or afternoon of Purim, the food would need to be precooked in order to be served at the afternoon seudah.

We already find the concept of caring for the poor and needy at times of joy in the Chumash. The Torah tells us with regard to the *Shalosh Regalim*:

And you shall rejoice before the L-rd your G-d, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow that are in the midst of you, in the place which the L-rd your G-d shall choose to cause His name to dwell there.

Devarim 16:11

וְשִׂמְחֶתָּ לִפְנֵי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ אַתָּה
וּבְנֶךָ וּבִתְּךָ וְעַבְדְּךָ וְאִמְתְּךָ
וְהַלְוִי אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ וְהַגֵּר
וְהַיְתוּם וְהָאֵלְמָנָה אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּךָ
בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
לִישֹׁן שְׁמוֹ שָׁם.
דברים טז:יא

This very concept may have been extended to Purim through the mitzvah of *mishloach manot*.

On the other hand, Rabbi Yehuda ibn Shushan, quoted in the *Manot Halevi* commentary of Rav Shlomo Alkabetz (Tzfat, 1500-1580) on Ester, suggests that the exchanging of gifts serves simply to bring Jews closer to one another. *Mishloach manot* are given—“*ish le'rei' eihu*—from a man to his friend,” as a goodwill gesture to strengthen the bonds between Jews.³ Jewish unity, in

¹ This article is written *lezeicher nishmat* Mr. Herb Smilowitz, z”l. Herb was a quiet giant of a man who served as Vice Chairman of the RIETS Board of Trustees. As a close friend of his son Mark, I had the *zechut* of knowing Herb from my childhood and was able to see first-hand not just his kindness and generosity, but also the way he led his community and family. May his memory be blessed.

² See *Magen Avraham*, 695:11.

³ For an interesting collection of practical differences between the two opinions, see Mirsky, (Rabbi) Yitzchak, *Hegyonei Halacha*, vol. 1 [Hebrew], pp 261-266. See also, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/purim/pur61-mt.htm> by R. Moshe Taragin of Yeshivat Har Etzion.

his opinion, has a special place in the celebration of Purim; to negate the words of Haman, who called the Jewish people an “*am mefuzar umeforad*,” “a people spread-out and separated [among the nations].” (Ester 3:8) Just as the Jews united in their cities to fight their anti-Semitic enemies (see Ester 9:2), they unite yearly to celebrate their victory.

Each suggestion has its challenges. The *Terumat HaDeshen*'s explanation, that *mishloach manot* help prepare for the Purim meal, seems to set Purim apart from most other holidays. Despite the aforementioned biblical exhortation “to remember the needy during the holidays,” there are few established practices to send food packages before the *yomim tovim*, with the exception perhaps, of the very expensive holiday of Pesach.⁴ While we may make an effort to invite the needy to our *yom tov* meals, and we may in particular cases send money for holiday preparation, there is no established practice of sending food portions for *seudot*. Why would Purim *seudah*, a rabbinic innovation, get more attention than the Torah festivals?

Furthermore, if the mitzvah of *mishloach manot* is a form of charity, why don't we make a particular effort to give our *mishloach manot* to the needy? *Maot chitim*, for example, which are distributed before Pesach, are given only to those who need financial help. *Mishloach manot* packages are given to wealthy and poor alike. And while rabbis often encourage their congregants to send *mishloach manot* to less noticed or less popular people in the community, there is no significant effort to direct these packages to the poor.

Chatam Sofer (*Orach Chaim* 196 and in notes to the *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 695) grapples with this second question of why the wealthy also receive packages, and suggests that *mishloach manot* was established in such a way as to not embarrass those who are actually in need of Purim food. Even the wealthy receive Purim food so as to protect the honor of the needy. This is certainly a worthy goal. However, the practices of singling out the poor for *matanot l'evyonim*, and before Pesach for *maot chitim*, would seem to prove that the need for directed funds trumps the need for the honor of the needy. Is the difference simply between food packages (given to both wealthy and poor) and checks (given only to a poor)?

If we look at *mishloach manot* as more of a community-building measure, many of these questions fall away. If brotherhood is the goal, there is no reason to differentiate between sending packages to the wealthy or the poor. And even if one were to argue that there is a special need to connect with people at different socio-economic strata, one could suggest that *matanot le'evyonim* assures that goodwill is spread not just to “friends” but to those who might be outside of one's social circle.

⁴ We do see one occasion upon which this commandment was fulfilled through the sending of gifts. Toward the end of the Book of Nechemiah, Ezra and Nechemiah gather the returnees to Judea and read to them from the Torah. The people are overcome with sorrow for their sins. It is then that Nechemiah encourages them to celebrate the holiday of Rosh Hashanah nonetheless. “And Nechemiah ... and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites that taught the people, said to all the people: ‘This day is holy unto the L-rd your G-d; mourn not, nor weep’ ... Then he said to them: ‘Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our L-rd; neither be grieved; for the joy of the L-rd is your strength’” (Nechemiah 8:9-10). This “sending of portions,” however, did not seem to be a regular practice at the time of the holidays.

However, it is not clear why the goodwill presents to friends need to be food.⁵ True, as Rav Ovadia Yosef (*Yechave Daat* 6:45) argues, nothing creates friendship like the sharing of food. Shall we suggest that this goodwill gesture of sending food on a day of feasting is not somehow connected to the mandated feasting of the day?

The Development of the Purim Holiday

I would like to suggest a novel approach to the development of *mishloach manot* based on a closer look at the development of the holiday as a whole.

The ninth *perek* of Ester describes a multi-stage process through which the holiday of Purim and the *mitzvot* of Purim were established. It is clear that the holiday started as a spontaneous celebration of a military victory and eventually evolved into a formal holiday with proscribed practices. Let's take a look at the relevant *pesukim* from the ninth chapter (verses 16-20):

And the rest of the Jews who were in the provinces of the king ... and rested on the fourteenth, and made it a day of feasting and joy. But the Jews who were in Shushan ... rested on the fifteenth, and made it a day of feasting and joy. Therefore the Jews of the villages, who dwelled in un-walled towns,⁶ would make the fourteenth of the month of Adar a day of joy and feasting and holiday, with the sending of portions to one another. Then Mordechai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Achashveirosh, near and far, to establish for them the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same,⁷ year by year, as the days when the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which had been turned for them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning to holiday, that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and the sending of portions to one another, and gifts to the poor.

וְשָׂאָר הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּמְדִינֹת הַמְּלָךְ ... וְנוֹחַ
בְּאַרְבַּעַת עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֶׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה
וְשִׂמְחָה: וְהַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוּשַׁן נִקְהְלוּ
בַּשְּׁלוֹשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וּבְאַרְבַּעַת עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְנוֹחַ
בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וַעֲשֶׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה
וְשִׂמְחָה: עַל כֵּן הַיְהוּדִים הַפְּרָזִים הֵיטְבִים
בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרָזוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבַּעַת עָשָׂר
לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר שְׂמִיחָה וּמְשֻׁתָּה יוֹם טוֹב וּמְשֻׁלַּח
מִנּוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ: וַיִּכְתֹּב מֶרְדֵּכַי אֶת הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים אֶל כָּל הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר
בְּכָל מְדִינֹת הַמְּלָךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוּשׁ הַקְּרוֹבִים
וְהַרְחוֹקִים: לְקַיֵּם עֲלֵיהֶם לְהִיּוֹת עֲשִׂים אֶת יוֹם
אַרְבַּעַת עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר וְאֵת יוֹם חֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר
בּוֹ כְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה: כִּימִים אֲשֶׁר נָחוּ בָהֶם
הַיְהוּדִים מֵאִיבֵיהֶם וְהַחֹדֶשׁ אֲשֶׁר נִהְפָּד לָהֶם
מִגֹּן לְשִׂמְחָה וּמֵאֲבָל לְיוֹם טוֹב לַעֲשׂוֹת אוֹתָם
יְמֵי מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה וּמְשֻׁלַּח מִנּוֹת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ
וּמִתְּנוּת לְאֲבִינָיִם:

There seem to be at least three stages in the celebrations following the miracle.

1. The year of the miracle (verses 16-18): The spontaneous celebration included the precursor to the Purim seudah—a day of feasting and joy.
2. The years—we don't know how many—following the miracle (verse 19): The celebrations continued, albeit in perhaps a slightly more muted way (“joy and feasting” instead of “feasting

⁵ This is the majority opinion. See *Darkei Moshe* (OC 695:7 and *Mishnah Berurah* SK 20).

⁶ See Malbim for an explanation as to why only those in un-walled towns celebrated in subsequent years.

⁷ See Malbim and Grossman, Yonatan, *Ester: Megillat Setarim* for explanations as to the significance of Mordechai expanding the holiday to the 15th of Adar.

and joy”). It is not clear what is meant by the “holiday,” although Chazal explain that there was an attempt to establish an *issur melachah*—a prohibition of work—similar to biblical festivals.⁸ Finally, there is the introduction of some sort of gift-giving—“*umishloach manot ish le’rei’eihu*.”

3. The official establishment of the holiday through Mordechai (verses 20-22): Mordechai formalizes the ongoing celebrations into a proscribed holiday with *mitzvot miderabbanan*. Mordechai establishes Purim as a part of the yearly calendar with three *mitzvot* (that are mentioned here): the Purim seudah, *mishloach manot* and *matanot l’evyonim*.

Many questions, some similar to those raised earlier, arise from a simple reading of the text:

- What motivated the Jews to begin to give Purim gifts in the years following the miracle? How and why did a yearly commemoration of the miracle lead to the exchange of food?
- Why do the Jews send presents only to their friends (*mishloach manot*) and not to the poor (*matanot l’evyonim*)? Is Mordechai, as a *gadol beYisrael*, simply more sensitive to the needs of the poor? Why didn't those who began to send *mishloach manot* also send *matanot l’evyonim*?
- *Mishloach manot* start at the second stage of the development of Purim and are established into law in “stage three.” Shall we assume that the *ta’am ha-mitzvah*, the rationale behind this practice, remained the same in both stages? Or is it possible that the reason for *mishloach manot* developed along with the changing nature of the holiday?

A New Explanation of *Mishloach Manot*

It seems that the *mitzvah* of *mishloach manot* evolved as the holiday developed. The practice began along the lines of the explanation of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, but later morphed into a practice motivated by the rationale of the *Sefer Manot HaLevi*.

One can be sure that all Jews celebrated in the first year, in the exciting days of feasting after the war. After a year spent fearing for their very lives, the Jews emerged victorious and safe; their relief and joy could not be contained. However, the celebrations naturally lessened with each passing year. Human nature is such that even very dramatic events quickly fade into the back of our consciousness as we return to our every day challenges.

Furthermore, Purim may have also developed slowly because it was not at all clear that the events described in *Sefer Ester* were the result of Divine intervention. The Purim story is a classic case of a *neis nistar*—a hidden miracle. While it may have been hard for a believing Jew not to see the *Yad Hashem*, there was most certainly a segment of the population who must have thought that the Divine involvement in Shushan and around the empire did not require a new holiday.

Without a doubt, the subsequent “Purims” were thus celebrated differently in different parts of the community—and even in different homes. Some probably tried to keep the original excitement of that first year alive, celebrating at festive meals as they did right after the war. Others certainly let the day go by with lesser levels of celebration.

⁸ See Bavli *Megillah* 5b.

At the core of the celebration was, from the first year and onward, Purim meals—“*yemei mishteh ve-simchah*.” Those who wished to commemorate Purim day and thank G-d for what had happened did so with a celebratory meal. I would suggest that the earliest *mishloach manot* were sent to encourage friends and family to celebrate. The food packages were originally intended, along the lines of the *Terumat HaDeshen*, to serve as the basis of the Purim seudah and *seudot*. They were not sent, however, for people too **poor** to make a Purim meal—rather too **disinterested**. The most religiously sensitive members of the community wanted to assure that Purim was not forgotten and, regardless of whether the rabbi would officially declare the day to be a holiday, wanted their fellow Jews to continue to celebrate the Purim miracle. To encourage their neighbors to remember the miracle—and to thank Hashem—they sent ready-made meals—or at least the basics of meals—so that there would be no reasons or excuses to forgo “Purim day.”

Once Mordechai established Purim as an official holiday, and in what we are calling “stage three,” the Purim seudah was legislated like any other *mitzvah midrabbanan*. On some level, the grass-roots effort to distribute Purim food had accomplished its goal. While every mitzvah, and especially a new *mitzvah midrabbanan*, needs *chizuk* (strengthening), the original purpose of *mishloach manot* was no longer truly necessary. No longer did people need to encourage their neighbors to mark the day. Chazal had stepped in.

But the giving of *mishloach manot* continued. The practice of sending gifts had already become a beloved part of the holiday. The *chachamim* included this practice as one of the *mitzvot* of Purim—but no longer as an outreach tool. What then, was the purpose of continuing this practice?

Now, in “stage three,” we can look to the *Terumat Hadeshen* and Rav Alkabetz. People were making Purim *seudot* anyway—but some couldn’t afford it. *Mishloach manot* assured that everyone could make the seudah. While *mishloach manot* may not have been invented to help the needy—for we don’t find this practice before most *yomim tovim*—the popular custom was continued to help the poor (and perhaps given to the wealthy to protect the honor of the poor). It is noteworthy that at this point Mordechai established another mitzvah, *matanot l’evyonim*, to assure that even the needy could properly celebrate Purim with a seudah.

Alternatively, the purpose of *mishloach manot* may have changed in a fundamental way after the *takanah* of the Purim seudah was in place. Now, the beloved *mishloach manot* custom would be continued as a way to allow Jews to connect with one another.

In summary, I would suggest that the *Terumat HaDeshen’s* suggestion—that *mishloach manot* are given to provide food for the Purim seudah—was certainly the case with the earliest packages that were shared. However, they were given as an outreach tool—not merely as an act of holiday-related *tzedakah*. Once the holiday of Purim was accepted by all, the practice of *mishloach manot* was maintained either as *tzedakah* or as an act of brotherly love, much in line with the explanation quoted in the *Sefer Manot HaLevi*.