

Our Hamantaschen's Forgotten Meaning

Of the many oddities codified as part of our annual Purim celebrations, Rabbi Moshe Isserles, in his glosses on the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C. 695:2), records a little-known custom of eating *ma'achal zeronim* (foods with seeds) on Purim in commemoration of the food Daniel and his fellows eat while in captivity in Nevuchadnezar's court (Daniel 1:8). Yet surprisingly, this medieval *minhag* to eat seeds on Purim (*Kolbo* # 45) is one many of us fulfill each year — albeit unknowingly — when we consume copious quantities of hamantaschen of the poppy seed variety. In fact, Rabbi Yisrael Isser of Ponevezh, in his *Menucha u-Kedusha*, explicitly connects the eating of these tasty triangular treats to the diet of Daniel and his friends. For him, poppy seed is not just another flavor, it is the *mahn* (Yiddish for poppy seed) in the hamantaschen. Scholar Hayyim Schauss echoes this idea by declaring that hamantaschen is merely a conglomeration of Haman, *mahn* (poppy seed) and *tashen* (pocket).² While we may be thankful for the trivia and this anomalous custom

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for bringing us our delightful three-cornered confectionaries, we are left pondering how Daniel's menu connects with the Purim saga. Why did we bake his story into our Purim observance each year?

Certainly, at first glance, the Books of Esther and Daniel seem intimately linked — they have similar characters and plots, use many of the same narrative devices, motifs and even specific textual parallels. Esther and Daniel, the title characters of both stories, are each called by a Hebrew and a foreign name (Esther 2:7; Daniel 1:6-7), are described as physically attractive (Esther 2:7; Daniel 1:4), and are blessed with the favor and trust of palace officials (Esther 2:9; Daniel 1:9-10). Daniel is stationed at the king's gate (Daniel 2:49) just as Mordechai sits at the

gate of the king (Esther 2:21). The two books share similar powerful moments of religious conflict and heroism — defiant refusals to bow down — and dire consequences for their faith-based insubordination (Esther 3:2-4; Daniel 3:12-18). Esther and Daniel are thrust into circumstances where they must intercede with the monarch in the hopes of averting the imminent destruction of their community (Esther 4-5; Daniel 2). Distinct parallels emerge even in depictions of governance in both books, as strange and capricious limitations preventing the amending of royal decrees feature prominently in both plots (Esther 8:8; Daniel 6:17). Fundamentally, the Books of Daniel and Esther tell tales of Jews coerced into the service of foreign power, who ultimately prove their worth, rising to greatness as courtiers and bringing honor and salvation to the Jewish people. The Books of Daniel and Esther focus on the same core question: How must Jews in the Diaspora conduct themselves in the palace of a foreign king — the seat of power of a foreign empire — the capital of an alien culture?

So in many ways, eating poppy seed hamantaschen on Purim to remember Daniel and his friends — Megillat Esther’s sister story — seems to make a lot of sense. However, a closer look at the stories show that while Daniel and Esther ask the same questions, the answers provided are remarkably different.

Indeed, the similarities embedded in text, character and plot between the works seem to be drawing them into conversation with each other, but the conversation is hardly a harmonious one. Placed side by side, stark differences emerge between approach and outlook advocated in Esther on the one hand and advanced in Daniel on the other. Daniel is seen repeatedly casting off and subverting any trace or association with his foreign hosts’ culture; Esther, on the other hand, is portrayed as being able to embrace her Persian milieu and marshaling it to help achieve her goals.

I. Names

Over the course of both books, Esther and Daniel are ascribed both Hebrew names and names in their vernaculars. Esther, thought to be derived from the Persian word for “star,” is also called by a Hebrew name, Hadassah (Esther 2:7), whereas Daniel is given the Babylonian name Belteshazzar upon entering the Babylonian royal academy (Daniel 1:6-7). Yet immediately in the next verse (Daniel 1:8), we witness Daniel’s total disregard for this new name, and throughout the entire Book of Daniel, not once is Daniel only referred to by this foreign name. By contrast, clearly the Book of Esther embraces her Persian name. After all, it is the Book of Esther not the Book of Hadassah, and once we are told her Hebrew name, Esther is never called Hadassah again. Even at the end of the Megillah as Esther is placed within her Jewish lineage, the verse identifies her as “Queen Esther daughter of Abihail” (9:29).

II. Royal Training and Food

Similarly, both Esther and Daniel are taken as part of formal royal programs with a set standard universally applied (i.e. a year’s regiment of beautification before meeting the king [Esther 2:9-12] and a course of food and study to prepare to be reviewed by the king [Daniel 1]), and both emerge recognized as the best. Yet how do our protagonists accomplish this? Esther seems



מדור לדור

by Rabbi Aaron Brander (RIETS Class of 1958)

When we arrived in America in 1950, after time in the DP camps in Europe, my father and mother made the heroic decision to send me to a yeshiva instead of the norm at the time of sending to public school. That heroic decision eventually led me to Yeshivas Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan and is the reason why I merit celebrating the simcha of the semikhah of my grandson in the very auditorium where I celebrated my semikhah 58 years ago and the semikhah of my two sons, Rabbi Kenny ('86R) and Rabbi Asher ('92R) Brander.

Knowing that there are nine musmakhim whose grandfathers are also RIETS musmakhim speaks volumes about the legacy and vitality of our Yeshiva. As I reflect on my family’s deep connection to RIETS for over 60 years, I am reminded of the verse (Kohelet 4:12) והחוט המשולש לא במהרה ינתק, the three stranded rope is not easily severed.

MIDOR L’DOR HONOREES

RIETS celebrates the semikha of eleven musmakhim whose grandfathers are also musmakhim of RIETS

Rabbi Tuvia Brander '15R • Rabbi Aaron Brander '59R
 Rabbi Shlomo Clark '14R • Rabbi Matthew Clark '56R
 Rabbi Yakov Danishefsky '16R • Rabbi Dr. Chaim Danishefsky z"l '46R
 Rabbi Noam Friedman '17R • Rabbi Abraham z"l Insel '45R
 Rabbi Noach Goldstein '17R • Rabbi Dr. Noah Goldstein z"l '53R
 Rabbi Jonathan Grossman '17R • Rabbi Zelo Schussheim z"l '48R
 Rabbi Ari Lamm '15R • Rabbi Norman Lamm '51R
 Rabbi Elchanan Poupko '16R • Rabbi Baruch Poupko z"l '42R
 Rabbi Itamar Rosensweig '14R • Rabbi Bernard Rosensweig '50R
 Rabbi Ashie Schreier '17R • Rabbi Max Schreier '52R
 Rabbi Yaakov Taubes '17R • Rabbi Chaim Schulman z"l '52R

to embrace the process; she follows Persian cultural and beauty norms and undergoes the strict treatment regimen in preparation for meeting the king:

(ט) וַתֵּיטֵב הַנְּעָרָה בְּעֵינָיו וַתִּשָּׂא חֹסֶד לְפָנָיו וַיְבַהֵל אֶת תַּמְרוּקֶיהָ וְאֶת מְנוֹתָהּ לְתֵת לָהּ וְאֶת שְׂבַע הַנְּעָרוֹת הָרְאִיּוֹת לְתֵת לָהּ מִבֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּשְׁנֶה וְאֶת נְעוּרֹתֶיהָ לְטוֹב בֵּית הַנְּשִׂימִים. (יב) וּבַהֲגִיעַ תֹּר נְעָרָה וְנְעָרָה לְבֹאֵר אֶל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ מִקֵּץ הַיּוֹת לָהּ כְּדַת הַנְּשִׂימִים שְׁנַיִם עָשָׂר חֹדֶשׁ כִּי כֹן יִמְלֹאוּ יְמֵי מְרוּקֶיהָ וְשָׂהָה חֲדָשִׁים בְּשָׂמֹן הַמֹּר וְשִׂשָׁה חֲדָשִׁים בְּבִשְׂמִים וּבַת־מְרוּקֵי הַנְּשִׂימִים:

(9) *The girl [Esther] pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem. (12) When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics).*

Esther 2:9,12

By contrast, Daniel refuses to participate at all:

(ה) וַיִּמְן לָהֶם הַמֶּלֶךְ דָּבָר יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ מִפֶּת בַּג הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיִּמְנוּ מִשְׁתֵּיו וּלְגַדְלָם שְׁנַיִם שָׁלוֹשׁ וּמִקְצָתָם יַעֲמְדוּ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ: (ח) וַיִּשֶׂם דָּנִיֵּאל עַל לְבוֹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִתְגַּאֵל בְּפִתְבַּג הַמֶּלֶךְ וּבָיִין מִשְׁתֵּיו וַיִּבְקֹשׁ מִשָּׂר הַסְּרִיסִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִתְגַּאֵל: (יב) נִס נָא אֶת עַבְדֶּיךָ יָמִים עֲשָׂרָה וַיִּתְּנוּ לָנוּ מִן הַזֵּרְעִים וְנֹאכְלָהּ וּמִיָּם וְנִשְׁתָּה:

(5) *The king allotted daily rations to them from the king's food and from the wine he drank. They were to be educated for three years, at the end of which they were entered the king's service. (8) Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king's food or the wine he drank, so he sought permission of the chief officer not to defile himself. (12) "Please test*

your servant for ten days, giving us seeds to eat and water to drink."

Daniel 1:5,8,12

Dr. Aaron Koller points out that Daniel's resistance here transcends the mere halakhic restriction of *kashrut*; it bespeaks a meta-protest on Daniel's part against any attempt of acculturation. Daniel employs very strident language — “be defiled” (Daniel 1:8) — in his refusal to eat the king's food. As he insists on consuming only seeds, it is these seeds that represent the prototypical anti-cultural food, unchanged from its natural form by human processes or society. The protest is only heightened when Daniel's final success is ascribed not only to his refusal to participate but to God's direct intervention (Daniel 1:17).

III. Encountering the King

In both stories, there are moments when Daniel and Esther must intercede with the king in desperate attempts to prevent the impending death sentence hanging over them and their communities. Yet here too, Esther and Daniel approach this challenge in vastly differently ways. Esther, famously tasked with forestalling Haman's decrees, prepares to meet the king by “donning royalty” (Esther 5:1); Esther approaches Achashverosh adorned in her stately Persian regalia. By contrast, Daniel prays by imploring God to help and returns to the king, careful to ascribe his knowledge to God:

וַרְחִמֵּנוּ לְמַבְעָא מִן קָדָם אֲ-לֵה שְׂמִיָּא עַל רִזָּה דְנָה דִּי לֹא יְהֻדְיוּ דְנִיָּאל וְחַבְרוּהִי עִם שְׂאָר חַפְיָמִי בְּבֵל: אֲדִינוּ לְדִנְיָאֵל בְּחֻזָּא דִּי לִילְיָא רִזָּה גְּלִי אֲדִינוּ דְנִיָּאל בְּרִף לֹא-לֵה שְׂמִיָּא ... עֲנֵה דְנִיָּאל קָדָם מַלְכָּא וְאָמַר רִזָּה דִּי מַלְכָּא שְׂאָל לֹא חַפְיָמִי אֲשַׁפִּיין חֲרַטְמִין גְּזָרִין יִכְלִין לְהַחְיָהּ

לְמַלְכָּא: בְּרַם אִיתֵי אֵלֵה בְּשְׂמִיָּא גְּלֵא רִזִּין וְהוֹדַע לְמַלְכָּא נְבוּכַדְנֶצַּר מַה דִּי לְהוּא בְּאַחֲרִית יוֹמִיָּא חֲלָמְךָ וְחֻזֵּי רִאשֻׁף עַל מִשְׁכְּבְךָ דְנָה הוּא. (18) *that they (Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah) might implore the God of the Heaven for help regarding this mystery, so that Daniel and his colleagues would not be put to death together with the other wise men of Babylon. (19) The mystery was revealed to Daniel in a night vision; then Daniel blessed God of Heaven ... (27) Daniel answered the king and said, "The mystery about which the king has inquired — wise men, exorcists, magicians, and diviners cannot tell to the king. (28) But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what is to be at the end of days. Daniel 2:18-19,27-28*

IV. Identity

The clearest contrast between Esther and Daniel — one closely connected with this central theme — is the way they construct and express their Jewish identity in public. Famously, Esther is instructed repeatedly not to reveal her “people nor her kindred” (2:10, 20), and it is only revealed in the direst of circumstances. Daniel, on the other hand, freely proclaimed his Jewish faith — openly attributing his every action and success to God. Even under extreme circumstances, Daniel refuses to hide his faith and even chooses to flaunt it as he prays before an open window facing Jerusalem under decree of death (Daniel 6:11).

The Struggles of Today's Times

As Jews today, many of us still grapple with navigating our identities as

Jews in the Diaspora. What we are presented with in both these stories are two unique and somewhat contradictory models of how to respond, exist and even thrive in exile. The story of Daniel carries a message of overt and defiant Jewish identity predicated on a total refusal to assimilate not only religiously but intellectually, culturally or emotionally. Daniel's refusal to even ingest foreign foods signals an opposition to even consider valuable wisdom in an alien society. It is a model in which foreign wisdom is resisted and political considerations are relegated to secondary. Esther, on the other hand, is a story of a closed Jewish identity centered on a willingness to adapt to everything: foreign lifestyles, language, foods and dress. It is a model in which outside wisdom is valued and harnessed to help empower the individual. Yet it also serves to strip away any explicit Jewish identity. Throughout Jewish history, these paradigms personified by Esther and Daniel resonated with some and were eschewed by others. Of all the Dead Sea scrolls

and fragments unearthed, not a single passage of Esther has been uncovered.³ Perhaps this is not surprising, as this ethos central to the Book of Esther is antithetical to the code and character of those desert communes. On the other hand, there is no holiday celebrating Daniel; it is only Purim immortalizing the example of Esther.

Which brings us back to our delicious hamantaschen — after all, what are our hamantaschen? Are they not just a scrumptious amalgamation of these two philosophies? It is a poppy seed core — symbolic of Daniel's defiance and his refusal to become a consumer of foreign culture — surrounded by sugary dough — the quintessential food of high culture — in a symbolic pocket acting as a cover for identity. It is this contradictory food that is eaten on Purim — the day devoted to celebrating Esther's covert mode of Jewish identity! Even the pastry eaten on the day of Esther cannot totally ignore the example of Daniel. Together, the hamantaschen forms a resounding message for all of us and a

reminder of the need to always work to synthesize the paradigm of Esther and the outlook of Daniel — engaged in the world around us, seeking to uncover and integrate the best of our foreign realities and, at the same time, always being aware and committed to never being defiled or defined by outside values.

Endnotes

1 I would like to thank my brother Yoni for his comments and revisions to this piece, and Dr. Aaron Koller for sharing with me the core of this idea and inspiring me to continue to pursue the study of Tanakh on ever-deeper levels. For a thorough overview of the scholarship and a thought-provoking discussion of the textual and thematic relationship between Daniel and Esther, see his book *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge U Press, 2015).

2 Hayyim Schauss, *The Jewish Festivals* (Random House, 1938; Hebrew 1933), p. 270. I came across this piece and the quotation of the *Menucha u-Kedusha* in a fascinating article by Eliezer Brodt (<http://seforim.blogspot.co.il/2007/02/eliezer-brodt-origins-of-hamantaschen-in.html>).

3 Israel Antiquities Authority (http://www.deadseascrolls.org.il/learn-about-the-scrolls/scrolls-content?locale=en_US).

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