

Purim: Out of Control

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Purim, with its jam-packed schedule of mitzvos, demands that we be wholly absorbed in festive celebration commemorating the miraculous salvation of Persian Jewry centuries ago. Often the obligations of the day leave little time for contemplation, and so we seldom ask ourselves: What grave sin had the Jews committed that caused their very existence to be threatened? Our question becomes more troubling in light of Chazal's dictum that the majority of the generation was completely righteous.¹¹⁸ The Jews of Persia seem to have been pious individuals well-focused on their service of G-d – not the careless and shallow Jews whom we often envision. Still ambiguity remains about their character which demands our attention and analysis.

The disciples asked R' Shimon Bar Yochai: 'Why did the Jewish people of that generation deserve extermination?' He said to them: 'You say [the reason].' They said to him: 'Because they derived pleasure from the feast of that wicked on [Achashveirosh]' If so, only the Jews of Shushan should have been ordered to be killed, but not the Jews of the rest of the world. They [disciples] said to him [R' Shimon Bar Yochai]: 'You tell us the reason.' He said to them: 'Because they prostrated themselves to an image [Rashi: in the days of Nevuchadnetzer].'¹¹⁹ They said to him: 'Should favoritism be shown in such a case?' He said to them: 'The Jews prostrated only outwardly [Rashi: out of fear]. Similarly, G-d dealt with them only outwardly [to frighten them into repenting].

Megillah 12a

“שאלו תלמידיו את רשב"י מפני מה נתחייבו שונאיהן של ישראל שבאותו הדור כליה, אמר להם אמרו אתם, אמרו לו מפני שנהנו מסעודתו של אותו רשע, אמר להם אם כן שבשושן יהרגו שבכל העולם כולו אל יהרגו, אמרו לו אמר אתה אמר להם מפני שהשתחוו לצלם (רש"י: בימי נבוכדנצר) אמרו לו וכי משוא פנים יש בדבר? אמר להם הם לא עשו אלא לפנים (רש"י: מיראה) אף הקב"ה לא עשה עמהם אלא לפנים...”
מגילה יב.

This passage clearly indicates that the severity of the sin that the Jews had committed in attending Achashveirosh's party warranted their annihilation. Even Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, who is critical of this reasoning because it does not account for the decree against the international Jewish community, seems to agree with his pupils' assessment of the gravity of such a wrongdoing. What, though, was so offensive about the participation in the Persian king's feast that it justified such a harsh punishment?¹²⁰ A similar question can be posed with regard to the

¹¹⁸ Shir Hashirim Rabba 7:8.

¹¹⁹ See Maharsha for discussion on why the gemara did not suggest that Haman's idol was the cause.

¹²⁰ See Shir Hashirim Rabba 7:8; Midrash Panim Acheirim Esther 4:1, both of which seem to stress the Jews' violation of bishul aku"m, the prohibition against eating foods cooked by a non-Jew. The suggestion that the Jews were threatened so severely due to their lax attitude towards a rabbinic mandate is quite perplexing. Perhaps their willingness to partake in such a meal was indicative of a much larger assimilation problem. The institution of bishul

gemara's conclusion. While at first glance it would seem that Rabbi Shimon Bar yochai maintains that it was regular, old fashioned idolatry that had jeopardized our nation's survival, the exact nature of this sin is also unclear. The gemara in Avoda Zara (3a) seems to consider Chananya's, Mishael's, and Azarya's refusal to prostrate themselves before Nevuchadnetzar's idol to be a tremendously pious demonstration of commitment to Hashem, way beyond the call of duty. The rishonim¹²¹ are bothered by the laudatory remarks of the gemara, for the Torah demands that we are to sacrifice our lives before serving other gods. What had these individuals done that deserved such praise? Rabbeinu Tam marshals much evidence indicating that the idol of Nevuchadnetzer was not actually served as a deity, but rather it was used as a vehicle through which one would demonstrate respect towards the monarchy. We as Jews are not required to sacrifice our lives to avoid such a demonstration, deeming those who did, exceptional. We, however, are now faced with a more nuanced problem. If the Jews of Babylon were not required to resist Nevuchadnetzer's decree, how could Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai proclaim that it was this "sin" that brought about Haman's evil decree?

Another question arises when comparing this gemara to the Midrash Rabbah on Megillat Esther (7:13). Once the decree of Haman had been officially sealed and the Jews of Persia had fallen into a state of despair and mourning, the following conversation took place between Eliyahu Hanavi and our forefathers:

"... And he [Eliyahu] said to them [forefathers] 'Until when will the fathers of the world remain sleeping. Are you not concerned with the tragedy that has befallen your children?' ... They [forefathers] responded to him [Eliyahu] 'Because of what [are the Jews being punished]?' He [Eliyahu] responded to them '**Because they benefitted from the feast of Achashveirosh and because of this it has been decreed upon them a decree to annihilate them from the world and to destroy their memory...**'"

... "ואמר להם עד מתי אבות העולם רדומים בשינה ואי אתם משגיחים על הצרה שבניכם שרויין בה... אמרו לו מפני מה? אמר להם מפני שנהנו מסעודתו של אחשורוש ובעבור זאת נגזרה עליהם גזירה לכלותם מן העולם ולאבד את זכרם..."

It is quite clear that the midrash views the Jews' participation in Achashverosh's party as the primary cause of the harsh decree. How, then, would they respond to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai who seems correct in his assertion that only the Jews of Shushan should be taken to task for this offense?

It has often been noted that the Purim miracle was unique in that G-d did not suspend any law of nature to accomplish His mission. The Vilna Gaon¹²² explains that herein lies the singularity of Purim among all the holidays which grace our calendar. He describes at length his understanding of the profound message of Purim above and beyond the rescue from Haman's decree. For the first time in their history the Jewish people were living without G-d's clear

aku"m was intended to serve as a boundary to prevent assimilation, and the Jews were overlooking these concerns. See also Bereishis Rabbasi pg. 167 which seems to indicate that the Jews were guilty of abandoning their dream of redemption. See also Shem Meshmuel parshat Titzaveh which elaborates on this point.

¹²¹ See Tosafos Avoda Zara (3a); Tosafos Kesubos (33b). See also Sefer Yemei Purim (Rabbi Dovid Cohen) pg. 121 where he notes that the gemara stresses the fact that the Jews enjoyed the banquet.

¹²² Commentary on Megillas Esther (1:2).

presence amongst them in the Beis Hamikdash. We, as a people, had already witnessed G-d's willingness and ability to intervene on our behalf in the most supernatural ways. Now, though, there was no Beis Hamikdash and G-d had removed any clear evidence of His existence from the world. Purim was much more than another miraculous salvation. It taught the Jewish people that even in this concealed state G-d was with them, ready to manipulate the course of history in their favor, provided that they maintain their unwavering faith in Him. The GR"A proposes that this is why the gemara searches more diligently for a Biblical reference to the Purim story than to any other miraculous event throughout history.

Where does the Torah make reference to Esther?

And I will conceal my face on that day...

Chulin 139b

אסתר מן התורה מנין? ואנכי הסתר אסתר פני ביום
ההוא.

חולין קלט:

Chazal were not simply searching for a superficial reference to the Purim story, but rather they looked for a source which affirmed that G-d actively orchestrates world events even at times when He seems to be hidden. Perhaps this lends greater understanding to the assertion that of all the holidays only Purim will continue to be celebrated after the coming of Moshiach.¹²³ The Maharal¹²⁴ teaches that the yomim tovim will no longer be celebrated then because the miracles they commemorate will pale in comparison to those that we will witness during the time of Moshiach. Purim, however, is *not* a celebration of awesome supernatural miracles: just the opposite is true. It is a celebration of our faith that G-d is always taking care of us even when there are no clear miracles which make this evident. And that is a message that will never be overshadowed or become irrelevant!

Based on this profound insight of the Vilna Gaon, perhaps we can begin to gain some understanding with respect to the questions we raised above. Could we not suggest that G-d's intimate involvement in our world was not merely an important coincidental message of the Purim story, but very possibly it was the impetus for the miracle in the first place! In his introduction to his essays on bitachon (faith in G-d), Rabbeinu Bachya Ibn Pakuda explains that we are required to put our full faith in G-d to the absolute exclusion of all other entities be they money, other people, or foreign deities. The moment one places his trust in anything other than G-d, G-d responds by placing him in the hands of that entity. For instance, if one believes that his wealth will keep him secure from any threat, God will remove His protection of that person, and allow him to be entirely dependent on his affluence, just as he had imagined. Creating an appropriate balance between bitachon (faith) and hishtadlus (human effort) is an ongoing and lifelong struggle faced by every Jew. One thing is clear: the effort one is required to invest into any endeavor should not be perceived as being effective independent of G-d. Rather, it must be viewed as a mechanism through which G-d executes his will. The fate of those who believe that

¹²³ Midrash Shochar Tov Mishlei (9:2); Talmud Yerushalmi Megillah (1:1); Rambam Mishneh Torah Hilchos Megillah (2:18). See also responsa of Rashba (1:96) where he explains the midrash to mean that Purim is the only holiday that will never be affected by persecution. See also Sefer Hachassidim (369); Chiddushei Maran Gri"z Halevi on Megillas Esther; Pachad Yitzchak (pg. 86) for further discussion on this topic.

¹²⁴ Introduction to Sefer Ohr Chadash.

they can accomplish independent of G-d's intervention will be determined solely by the natural outcome of their efforts, for better or for worse.¹²⁵

Perhaps it was this theological perspective that eluded the Jews of Persia. With G-d no longer clearly revealed in their midst, they believed that He had forsaken them entirely. It was crucial that they embrace a new lifestyle now that they were at the mercy of their earthly monarchs. They could no longer depend on G-d to control their destiny, for He had left them to fend for themselves. Accordingly, when the King requested their presence at his royal banquet there was no option but to attend, regardless of the inappropriateness of such affairs. Similarly, when every citizen was asked to display his loyalty by prostrating himself before the despotic Nevuchadnetzer the Jews had no choice but to follow suit, even if it compromised their values. It is true that these transgressions, analyzed in their simple context, were not outrageous offenses, and were even, perhaps, the appropriate courses of action given their tenuous situation. Yet, when we look at the deeper context, it was the flawed mindset which accompanied these actions that was a threat to their spiritual survival. It seems that our Persian ancestors were under the impression that they had been thrown entirely at the mercy of their monarch. They were hopeful that by forging a relationship of good will with him, they could insure that he would be attentive to their needs. While Judaism encourages us to nurture prudent political relationships, we are expected to realize that ultimately our greater dependency is not upon transitory rulers, but upon the eternal King, hidden though he may be. When G-d saw that the Jews of Persia were placing excessive trust in their own ability to achieve security through diplomacy, independent of Him, He took action which made them, in fact, subject to the whims and injustices of their monarchs. How telling that the very basis which Maimonides uses as the source of the system whereby G-d's presence is felt in direct proportion to our reliance on him, and vice versa, is the pasuk "V'anochi hastir aster," the single biblical allusion to the Purim story¹²⁶! Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai and his students were in agreement that this lapse of faith was cause for the passage of the evil decree and the anguish which it caused. Their difference of opinion was merely over the various scenarios in which the Jews had exhibited this sort of reliance on diplomatic gestures.

Now, the conclusion of the passage we cited above becomes more meaningful. Chazal questioned why the Jews were punished so severely if their actions were expressions of fear rather than of rebellion. They concluded that G-d reacted precisely in accordance with the offense that had been committed. Since their transgressions were born of fear, the Almighty only **threatened** with a decree of annihilation, but did not allow its execution. From its very inception the entire purpose of the decree was simply to frighten the Jews into realizing that they could not control their own destiny without the involvement of G-d. The fact that the Jews had succumbed to their fears was reflective of their broader erroneous assumption that G-d was not in control of their fate. A mere threat was able to address this specific philosophical misconception. Haman's verdict taught them this lesson in time for them to strengthen their faith in G-d.

¹²⁵ See also Ramban Iyov (36:7), Bereishis (15:6); Rambam Moreh Nevuchim (3:17,18,51); Rashba Chidushei Agados Taanis (11a); Gr"a Bava Kama (92b), Berachos (60a); Nefesh Hachaim (1:7); for lengthier discussion of this concept.

¹²⁶ Moreh Nevuchim (3:51). [Pointed out to me by Rabbi Baruch Dov Braun.]

Perhaps Chazal themselves were communicating this idea in the following statement:¹²⁷

Rabbi Nathan says, 'Haman did not come but as a reminder to future generations as it states...

רבי נתן אומר לא בא המן אלא זכר לדורות
שנאמר...

That [future] generations will know that even though the nations of the world will cast upon them difficult decrees G-d will save them from their hands, and they should not fear them
Magen Avraham (Zayis Ra'anah)

שידעו הדורות אע"פ שיגזרו האומות
עליהם גזירות קשות הקב"ה יצילם
מידם ואל יתייראו ממנו.
מגן אברהם זית רענן

At first glance this comment seems quite puzzling. Granted, that the story of Purim serves as an eternal reminder of G-d's constant protection over us, but presumably that was only an incidental result of how the miraculous story developed. Yet, based on what we have suggested it is conceivable that the midrash was meant to be taken literally - that the entire purpose of Haman's verdict was to strengthen the nation's belief in G-d's supervision and involvement.

With this in mind, we become sensitized to a recurring undertone that exists throughout Megillas Esther. Mordechai's mission was not merely to inspire the Jews to repentance, but to influence their perspective on the world. G-d was with them now, as He was before, ready to protect their destiny so long as they place their faith in Him alone. Mordechai's charge was to educate his nation to understand that while they must take advantage of any and every opportunity to ensure their safety, it must be perceived in the context of enabling the realization of G-d's plan. This adds tremendous significance to Mordechai's harsh criticism of Esther when she was apprehensive in approaching Achashverosh.

For if you will be silent now, a salvation will come for the Jews from a different place, and you and your father's house will be lost, and who knows if for this moment you were brought to the monarchy.

Esther 4:14

כי אם החרש תחרישי בעת הזאת רוח
והצלה יעמד ליהודים ממקום אחר
ואת ובית אביך תאבדו ומי יודע אם
לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות
אסתר ד:יד

Mordechai is clearly stressing to Esther that although she is practically the one executing their plan, she is but a pawn in G-d's hand. The salvation will come in one way or another regardless of Esther's willingness to be involved. Although Mordechai was orchestrating all the hishtadlus that was to be done, he was very aware that it was ultimately G-d who would be supplying the salvation. It was their inability to internalize this notion that had incriminated the Jews of Persia. In this light we can gain appreciation for an additional midrash which records Esther's thoughts as she was approaching King Achashveirosh.

*And You, the Father of orphans, please stand to the right of this orphan, in Whose mercy she **trusted**, and give me for mercy before this man.*

ואתה אבי יתומים עמוד נא לימין
היתומה הזאת אשר בחסדך **בטחה**
ותנה אותי לרחמים לפני האיש הזה

¹²⁷ Mechilta Parshas Beshalach Mesechta D'Amalek (chapter 2); Yalkut Shimoni (there 266). See also Toras Shleimah on Megillas Esther (9:28:105) for alternative explanations.

The midrash testifies that Esther had truly internalized Mordechai’s criticism and realized that her efforts would only be a success if she realized that her mission was in G-d’s hands alone. It was this steadfast faith in G-d that elevated Mordechai and Esther above the people of their generation. The Midrash Tehillim comments

<p><i>In You our fathers trusted (psalms 22:5) ... These are Mordechai and Esther</i></p>	<p>בך בטחו אבותינו (תהילים כב:ה)...אלו מרדכי ואסתר</p>
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We clearly see that it was this aspect of their character that enabled their accomplishments.

In truth, this conflict between Mordechai and Haman was a microcosm of the broader, ongoing ideological clash between the Jews and Amalek in general. The essence of Amalek is their refusal to acknowledge G-d’s providence in this world. Our miraculous exodus from Egypt had convinced the entire world not only of G-d’s omnipotence, but also of His personal concern for His people. Amalek, however, attributed all of it to natural coincidence¹²⁸. It was this conviction that encouraged them to attack the People of Israel. The mishna in Maseches Rosh Hashana (29a) tells us that during that war, when the Jewish people would see Moshe Rabbeinu’s hands lifted towards heaven they would be victorious in battle. As long as we realized that G-d was in control of the battle He would defeat our enemies. However, when we were unable to remain focused heavenward, we would succumb to Amalek’s mentality, believing that it was our strength which would determine our military success or failure. This has been the model of our conflicts with Amalek throughout history. When we are influenced by their conviction that G-d is not in control, G-d removes Himself from the equation and allows them to overpower us. The Purim story was a new manifestation of an age-old debate. The Jews had placed their faith in foreign entities and Amalek’s descendant, Haman, was there to take advantage of their spiritual weakness. Haman himself highlighted this philosophical conflict with his implementation of a lottery. The inherent nature of a lottery is chance. He was demonstrating to the Jews that their very demise would be the result of mere coincidental events. Thus chazal chose to name this day of celebration, ‘Purim (lottery).’ The true victory was the clear exhibition of G-d’s involvement even in the most “coincidental” events¹²⁹.

Midrash Rabba records that Mordechai himself made a subtle reference to Haman’s notorious ancestors in his plea to Esther to approach the king on her nation’s behalf:

<p><i>And Mordechai told him [Hasach] of all that had happened to him</i> Esther 4:6</p> <p><i>The grandson of he who chanced upon you, is coming upon you, as it states (Deut. 28:18) '[Amalek] that chanced upon you on the way'</i> Esther Rabba 8:5</p>	<p>ויגד לו מרדכי את כל אשר קרהו אסתר ד:ו</p> <p>בן בנו של קרהו בא עליכם ההוא דכתיב, אשר קרד בדרך אסתר רבה ח:ה</p>
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¹²⁸ See Sefer Ohr Chadash (149b) and Sefer Tiferes Yisroel (ch. 17 pg. 262) where Maharal elaborates on this idea.
¹²⁹ See also Days of Deliverance by Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik (pg.15); Shiurei Harav: A Conspectus of the Public Lectures of Rabbi Joseph B. Soleveitchik (1974) (pg.100).

Perhaps Mordechai himself is intimating that Haman's current attack is reminiscent of the philosophical war his ancestors had waged years before.

This approach brings greater clarity to another enigmatic midrash:

... The desire for idolatry was already uprooted... When was the desire for idolatry uprooted? R' Banya says in the days of Mordechai and Esther, the rabbis say in the days of Chananya, Mishael, and Azarya...

Shir Hashirim Rabba 7:8

יצר עבודת כוכבים כבר נעקר... אימתי
נעקר יצר עבודת כוכבים? רב בנייה
אמר אלו [ימי] מרדכי ואסתר ורבנן
אמרי אלו חנניה מישאל ועזריה...
שיר השירים רבה ז:ח

The midrash records that there was a time when people struggled to overcome their natural desire to serve foreign gods. While there is a debate as to when this human urge began to wane, there is a clear opinion that it was eliminated during the time of Mordechai and Esther¹³⁰. The Jews had been seduced by this temptation for generations; what had suddenly occurred that prompted such a drastic change in human nature? The Mahara¹³¹ understands this temptation to be inherently different from those which we normally encounter. While most urges we experience stem from a desire for physical pleasure, the appeal of foreign deities was entirely intellectual. Obviously we can never fully appreciate or relate to the strength of such a craving. However, we can attempt to understand on its most basic level where this desire stemmed from.

Rav Yochanan said, the wicked are sustained upon their gods ... but upon the righteous their God is sustained.

Midrash Rabba Bereishis 69:3

אמר רב יוחנן הרשעים מתקיימין על אלהיהם,
... אבל הצדיקים אלקיהם מתקיים עליהם
מדרש רבה בראשית ט:ג

Rav Moshe Shapiro¹³² offers a jarring, yet thought-provoking suggestion to explain this midrash.¹³³ Rav Yochanan is explaining to us a fundamental difference between our G-d and those of the pagan religions. Whereas we enjoy and embrace G-d's complete control over us, pagan ritual empowered the worshipper with the ability to control the deity. If served properly the god could not reject nor neglect the needs of its patrons. In essence the god really worshiped those who serve him. There is nothing more comforting and enjoyable to a person than a sense of complete control. As we have explained, the most significant lesson of the Purim story is the reality that G-d is the only one who can truly provide a sense of security. The comfortable feeling of control one gains from belief in other entities (be it deities or monarchs) will prove to be false and empty, as it was to the Jews of Shushan.

Studied in this light, many of the laws of Purim take on a new dimension. It is well known, for example, that on Purim we are enjoined to become intoxicated to the point of utter confusion.

A person is required to drink until he does not know the difference between cursed is Haman and blessed is Mordechai.

Megillah 7b

חייב איניש לבסומי עד דלא ידע בין
ארור המן לברוך מרדכי.
מגילה ז:

¹³⁰ See Sanhedrin 64a which indicates that it was removed by the Anshei Knesses Hagedola.

¹³¹ Introduction to Sefer Be'er Hagola; Sefer Netzach Yisroel (ch. 3).

¹³² Shiur on Parshas Mikeitz 2010.

¹³³ See also the commentary of Minchas Kohanim there that understands the midrash differently.

Why does Purim's requirement for drinking far exceed that of any other religious celebration¹³⁴? Perhaps we can suggest that this distinction is reflective of the unique message of Purim. Purim's role in our development as spiritual beings is to remind us that all the energies we expend on our many endeavors are not the sole, or even main, source of our accomplishments. Our efforts must be perceived in the larger context of faith in G-d's complete control over the outcomes of our actions. On Purim we internalize this idea by robbing ourselves of our most empowering feature, our intellect. We force ourselves into a state which incapacitates us, leaving us totally "out of control." For one day of the year we remind ourselves that we are never really in the driver's seat.

Similarly, we can more richly appreciate another of the mitzvos of Purim. The Shulchan Aruch codifies that in addition to the requirement of giving charity to the poor for their Purim necessities, there is a prohibition against turning away any individual who requests funds on Purim.¹³⁵ One is not permitted to investigate the needs of the solicitor in order to ensure that his is a legitimate cause.¹³⁶ To be sure, the primary goal of this mandate is to ensure that Purim is a day where we develop and affirm positive interpersonal relationships;¹³⁷ still our thesis supports another dimension. Perhaps for one day a year Chazal presented us with the mental challenge of giving without any hesitation or concern. While we are normally required to ensure that our donations are not wasteful, and are indeed benefitting a worthy charity, on Purim we give priority to the development of a different value. Our ability to part with our wealth without any thought or decision-making promotes awareness that we did not amass such prosperity on our own. Chazal's intention was not to honor an illegitimate request as much as it was to awaken within the donor the realization that his success is not a product of his efforts.

In a like manner we can analyze yet a third singular aspect of Purim. The gemara in Megillah (5b) records that the original proposal for the Purim holiday included within it a prohibition of melacha, similar to that of Shabbos and Yom Tov. While the Jews of the time accepted the new day of celebration, they rejected the obligation to refrain from working. The Rambam¹³⁸, however, declares that although it is permitted to work on Purim one who does so will not reap the fruit of his labor¹³⁹. Perhaps this statement is once again reflective of this most fundamental aspect of Purim. If we are correct that the role of Purim is to reinforce our belief in G-d's complete control over our success, what better way is there to internalize such a notion than to refrain from our daily hishtadlus and creativity. By not working we are expressing our realization that human effort is never the sole cause of our productivity or triumph - again the fundamental message of Purim.

This year, rather than focusing strictly on the celebration of our salvation from Haman's evil decree, we ought to contemplate, as well, the weakness that originally put the Jews in danger. We should turn our thoughts to the omnipotence of G-d and his active involvement in our daily lives, and put all of our accomplishments into perspective: they are simply a vehicle through

¹³⁴ See also Pachad Yitzchak chapter 23.

¹³⁵ Ohr Hachaim (694:3) based on Talmud Yerushalmi Megillah (1:4).

¹³⁶ See also Pachad Yitzchak chapter 16.

¹³⁷ See Ritva and Ramban Bava Metzia (78b) that explain why charity on Purim is different than year round.

¹³⁸ Hilchos Megillah (2:14).

¹³⁹ See also Pachad Yitzchak chapter 20.

which G-d provides us with blessing. With this mindset, we are less likely to fall prey to the same traps which ensnared Persian Jewry.