

# Purim: The Other Day of Rest

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A basic question arises concerning the celebration of Purim. Why do we celebrate Purim on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar (in unwalled and walled cities respectively)? The obvious answer is that on that day we defeated our enemies. But if we examine the text of the Megilla carefully it becomes clear that the Jews were not victorious on the fourteenth or fifteenth but on the thirteenth and fourteenth. Why, then, do we celebrate Purim on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar? The Megilla explains:

*The other Jews in the king's provinces gathered and defended their lives. They rested from their enemies and killed among their haters 75,000 men, yet they did not extend their hands to take the spoils. [All this took place] on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. **On the fourteenth of that month they rested**, and made it a day of feasting and joy. The Jews in Shushan gathered on the thirteenth and fourteenth of that month. **On the fifteenth of that month they rested**, and made it a day of feasting and joy. Therefore the Jews who dwelled in unwalled cities observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar with joy, feasting, Yom Tov, and sending portions from a man to his friend.*

**Esther 9:16-19**

ושאר היהודים אשר במדינות המלך  
נקהלו ועמד על נפשם ונוח מאיביהם  
והרג בשנאייהם חמשה ושבעים אלף  
ובבזה לא שלחו את ידם: ביום שלשה  
עשר לחדש אדר ונוח בארבעה עשר בו  
ועשה אתו יום משתה ושמחה: והיהודים  
אשר בשושן נקהלו בשלשה עשר בו  
ובארבעה עשר בו ונוח בחמשה עשר בו  
ועשה אתו יום משתה ושמחה: על כן  
היהודים הפרזים הישבים בערי הפרזות  
עשים את יום ארבעה עשר לחדש אדר  
שמחה ומשתה ויום טוב ומשלוח מנות  
איש לרעהו:

**אסתר ט:טז-יט**

The Megilla states clearly that the date of Purim corresponds not to the day of the triumph but to the day the Jews rested from battle.<sup>173</sup>

<sup>173</sup> Interestingly, we encounter Purim as “the day of rest” in another context. The Mishnah (Megilla 2a) states that the residents of towns may read the Megilla on a number of dates including the thirteenth of Adar. The Gemara explains that this date does not require a scriptural source for it and can be derived from pure logic, as the thirteenth of Adar is “*z'man kehila lakol*,” “a time of gathering for all.” In what sense is the thirteenth a day of gathering, and how does that justify reading the Megilla on that date? Rabbenu Tam (quoted in Rosh 1:1, Ran 1b *be'Alfas*) interprets this phrase to mean that the Jews gathered and fasted before they went out to war (according to Rabbenu Tam this Gemara in fact provides a Talmudic source for Ta'anit Esther), whereas Rashi (2a s.v. *z'man*) explains that on the thirteenth the Jews who had gathered for battle vanquished the enemy.

Ignoring the military victory seems quite unusual. After all, Purim ostensibly celebrates the miraculous triumph over our enemies, which unfolded on the thirteenth and fourteenth! In contrast, for example, *Shevi'i shel Pesach* is celebrated on the seventh day of Pesach, the very day our Egyptian tormentors drowned in the sea. Why then was Purim not similarly established on the day we defeated our enemies? Why do we celebrate the rest, as opposed to the victory?<sup>174</sup>

## Marking the Downfall of Our Enemies

In his *Meshech Chochmah* (Shemot 12:16), Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk offers a beautiful approach to Purim. Building on the famous Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni Beshalach* 233) in which Hashem forbids the angels from reciting *shira* upon *keriat yam suf* because "מעשי ידי טובעים בים" "My creations are drowning in the sea and you sing praises before Me?" R. Meir Simcha posits that we celebrate the day of rest on Purim to stress that we commemorate not the destruction of the enemy but the salvation of *klal yisrael*.

R. Meir Simcha further continues that we encounter the same phenomenon in connection with Chanukah and Pesach, which similarly commemorate military victories. Lighting the *Menorah* highlights only the miracle of the oil, the rededication of the Temple and Hashem's providence – not the military victory – so as to avoid the possible misunderstanding that we celebrate the downfall of the Syrian-Greeks.

The *Meshech Chochmah* advances a similar thesis regarding *Shevi'i shel Pesach*. It seems puzzling that Hashem instructed the Jews when they still remained in Egypt to abstain from *melacha* on the seventh day:

*Seven days you shall eat Matzah. But on the first day you shall destroy leavened bread from your homes. For anyone who shall eat chametz from the first through seventh day – that soul shall be cut off from Israel. And on the first day shall be a holy convocation. And on the seventh day shall be a holy convocation to you. No work shall be performed on them, with the exception*

שבעת ימים מצות תאכלו אך ביום הראשון תשביתו שאר מבתיכם כי כל אכל חמץ ונכרתה הנפש ההוא מישראל מיום הראשון עד יום השבעי: וביום הראשון מקרא קדש וביום השביעי מקרא קדש יהיה לכם כל מלאכה לא יעשה בהם אך אשר יאכל

At first glance Rashi's explanation appears quite reasonable. The Ran (1b *be'Alfas*), however, rejects this interpretation, based on Tosafot who argue that the matter does not depend on war; rather, the Megilla made it dependent upon resting. Tosafot's argument echoes the *pesukim* in the Megilla, which relate that Purim was in fact established not on the day of victory but on the day of rest.

Rashi would presumably answer that although the original date of Purim was set on the day of rest, the day of war is sufficiently important to justify setting that date as an alternative for reading the Megilla. Thus Tosafot maintains that the final day of battle is completely irrelevant, whereas Rashi holds that it remains significant, albeit on a secondary level.

It is also interesting to note that the debate between Rashi and Tosafot seems to echo the Talmud Yerushalmi (Megilla 1:1). At first the Yerushalmi claims that pure logic does not dictate reading the Megilla on the thirteenth, as it is the anniversary of the war and not the day of rest. Rather, we require a *passuk* to justify reading the Megilla on this date. This follows the logic of Tosafot. However, the Yerushalmi's conclusion seems to side with Rashi, arguing that the victory on the battlefield is at least sufficient to justify reading the Megilla on the thirteenth.

<sup>174</sup> For an interesting approach to this problem see Rabbi Yehuda Shaviv, which is available on Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash at <http://vbm-torah.org/purim/pur58-ys.htm>. Rav Shaviv links "menucha" on Purim to the rest of Shabbat and especially to that of the messianic era, which will follow the destruction of Amalek.

of any work performed for enjoyment – that alone may be performed for you.

**Shemot 12:15-16**

לכל נפש הוא לבדו יעשה לכם:  
שמורת יב-טו-טז

First, the sea had not yet split, so the day remained bereft of any historical significance! Second, the Gemara asserts (Pesachim 96b) that during the first year of Pesach the prohibition of *chametz* was limited to the first day. As many *acharonim* note (*Tzlach* Pesachim 37b and others), we may similarly assume that there was no *issur melacha* on the seventh day. If so, why would Hashem instruct the Jews now that *Shevi'i shel Pesach* would be holy? The day's status would not be in effect until future years?! In light of the above, the answer is clear. *Hashem intentionally instructed the Jews about the seventh day before the splitting of the sea, so as to stress that we do not celebrate the seventh day due to the drowning of the Egyptians but irrespective of that event.*<sup>175</sup> For this reason Hashem commanded the observance of *Shevi'i shel Pesach* now: the profound message of *ahavat ha-beriyot*, love of all human beings, is so crucial that Hashem taught that formative lesson even before the holiday was to be observed.<sup>176</sup>

R. Meir Simcha also utilizes this approach to explain an intriguing *ma'amar Chazal*. The Gemara (*Megilla* 7a) records a dialogue between Esther and the contemporary rabbis, in which Esther argues that Purim should be established as a permanent holiday. The rabbis hesitate, expressing the concern that "קנאה את מעוררת בין האומות", "you will thereby stir jealousy among the other nations." The Meshech Chochmah understands the rabbis to be worried that celebrating the Jews' military supremacy might lead to an increase in anti-Semitism.<sup>177</sup> How would Esther respond to the rabbis' seemingly legitimate concern? R. Meir Simcha explains that there would be no increase in anti-Semitism because the holiday celebrates not the victory *per se* but the salvation of the Jewish people.<sup>178</sup>

<sup>175</sup> R. Meir Simcha does not account for the uniqueness of the seventh day. Perhaps he would assert as a general principle that the first and last day of a *yom tov* is celebrated as "*mikra kodesh*." According to this approach, *Shevi'i shel Pesach* would be quite similar to *Shmini Atzeret*. This connection is reinforced by the language of the passuk in *Parshat Re'eh* (Devarim 16:8), "ששת ימים תאכל מצות וביום השביעי עצרת לה' אלקיך לא תעשה מלאכה". Indeed, Ramban and Rabbenu Bachaye (ibid.) link *Shevi'i shel Pesach* and *Shmini Atzeret*. It should be noted, however, that many commentators, including Ibn Ezra and Rabbenu Bachaye (Shemot 12:16), clearly reject the Meshech Chochmah's thesis, instead linking the *issur melacha* on *Shevi'i shel Pesach* to the events of *keriat yam suf*.

<sup>176</sup> We can raise an obvious question on the Meshech Chochmah's thesis: Why then do we not celebrate the last day of *yom tov* on the eighth day instead of the seventh, in keeping with the model of Purim? Two answers come to mind. First, whereas on Purim the Jews did not rest until the following day because they needed to return home from the battlefield, on Pesach it is reasonable to assume that the Jews rested on the seventh day itself. Second, as we discussed in the previous footnote, according to R. Meir Simcha there was an entirely different reason that *Shevi'i shel Pesach* was established on that date. Apparently this reasoning could not be overridden by the concern for the enemy's downfall. Therefore Hashem chose to convey the message of "מעשי ידי טובעים בים" in ways other than by delaying the holiday.

<sup>177</sup> This reading fits nicely with Rashi (s.v. *kinah*), who, in explaining the Chachamim's concern, specifically stresses that the potential spike in anti-Semitism will be due to the nations' perception that "שמחים להזכיר מפלתן", "we are happy to mark their downfall."

<sup>178</sup> Despite its creativity, however, R. Meir Simcha's interpretation of the Gemara seems rather difficult, as in the very next line of the Gemara, Esther responds that the events of Purim have already been publicized in the Persian

A possible support for the Meshech Chochmah's interpretation appears toward the end of the Megilla (9:30), where Mordechai sends a letter conveying "דברי שלום ואמת", "words of peace and truth." Perhaps the Megilla indicates that Mordechai went out of his way to stress the peaceful nature of the holiday. We can similarly account for the closing words of the Megilla, which curiously describe Mordechai as "דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו", "seeking good for his nation and speaking peace to all his progeny." What does it mean that Mordechai spoke peace to his progeny, and how is it different from seeking the good of his nation? It is especially curious that the final words of the Megilla are left ambiguous. We can suggest that the Megilla closes by stressing that despite his powerful position, and despite having instituted the holiday of Purim, Mordechai went out of his way to stress the fundamentally peaceful message of Purim and the Megilla. By concluding with these words, the Megilla emphasizes that this theme of harmony is essential to the holiday of Purim and deserves to be underscored.<sup>179</sup>

## Proactive Celebration

We can offer a second approach: the "day of rest" motif underscores a fundamental insight specific to the nature of Purim. Megillat Esther stresses that the Jews accepted Mordechai's edict to establish the days of Purim (9:23,27). Moreover, it seems that it was the "amcha," the Everyman, who named the holiday "Purim" (9:26). As mentioned, the Gemara (Megilla 7a) records Esther's attempts to establish Purim as a holiday not only for that year but for all future generations. Indeed, she eventually succeeded in convincing the rabbis to establish Purim. *The Jews were not only passive recipients of Hashem's benevolence; they responded to the salvation by actively participating in the institution the holiday.* In the striking phraseology of the Megilla, "ויקבל" "היהודים את אשר החלו לעשות", "the Jews accepted that which they had already begun to perform."

A similar theme emerges from Ramban's thesis as to why residents of unwalled cities celebrate Purim on the fourteenth, a day earlier than residents of walled cities. Ramban explains that those residing in unwalled cities were particularly vulnerable and therefore found themselves in greater danger than their brethren. In appreciation for their salvation the residents of these cities celebrated a *Yom Tov*:

*And afterward during subsequent years, the residents of the unwalled cities stood and of their own volition observed the fourteenth day with happiness, feasting and Yom Tov. But the residents of the walled cities did nothing, for the miracle was greater in the unwalled cities, and they were in greater danger.*

**Ramban Megilla 2a**

ולאחר מיכן בשנים הבאות עמדו פרזים ונהוג מעצמן לעשות יום ארבעה עשר שמחה ומשתה ויום טוב. אבל מוקפין לא עשו כלום לפי שהיה הנס גדול בפרזים והיה עליהם [הסכנה] יותר.  
רמב"ן מגילה ב.

chronicles. According to the Meshech Chochmah, she should have simply answered that there will be no anti-Semitism because we are not celebrating their downfall! Perhaps R. Meir Simcha would respond that despite the widespread knowledge, establishing a holiday would have nevertheless stoked the coals of anti-Semitism, if not for the fact that the *yom tov* is focused not only the enemies' defeat but on Jewish survival. Nevertheless, the difficulty remains.

<sup>179</sup> Admittedly, however, Ibn Ezra, Alshich and Malbim understand this phrase differently.

As a reward for having taken the initiative and established the holiday on their own, the members of the unwalled cities celebrate Purim a day early. My teacher HaRav Michael Rosensweig noted that Ramban's analysis heightens the role of *klal yisrael's* initiative in the establishment of Purim.<sup>180</sup>

This theme of proactivity is not limited to the establishment of the holiday. Although the Jews were permitted to plunder the booty (Esther 8:11) they chose not to do so (9:10,15,16), apparently of their own volition and without any rabbinic directive. Moreover, there are numerous indications that the nation played a crucial role in the salvation. According to Chazal, the Jews were deemed guilty for having attended Achashveirosh's party and were nearly wiped out because of their sins (Megilla 12b, Midrash Megillat Esther 179). Furthermore, the Megilla stresses that all Jews were included in the decree, including "young and old, women and children" (3:13). According to this understanding the Jews' salvation was due primarily to their repentance.<sup>181</sup> Indeed, according to this reading the crucial turning point comes when the Jews join Mordechai in prayer and fasting (Esther 4:3; see also 4:16-17); they not only pray for their lives but also perform *teshuvah* for having attended the feast and more generally for the sin of assimilation.<sup>182</sup>

This understanding of Purim sheds new light on the famous Gemara (Shabbat 88a), which understands the phrase "קיימו וקבלו" to indicate that although we did not fully accept the Torah at *Har Sinai* – God had threatened us by holding the mountain over our heads – we willingly accepted the Torah at the time of Purim. How did Chazal derive this novel idea? In light of the proactivity theme we can suggest that the Gemara is simply building off what we already know about *klal yisrael's* response to the miracles of Purim. Just as the phrase "קיימו וקבלו" powerfully highlights our active role in instituting the holiday, so too it demonstrates our proactivity in another sense. Although the Jews of Persia found themselves far removed from the foot of *Har Sinai*, nevertheless *of their own volition they recommitted themselves to the covenant of Sinai*. קיימו וקבלו is a dramatic manifestation of the spiritual creativity the Jews demonstrated at the time of Purim.

By way of contrast, the Gemara records that the rabbis themselves established the holiday of Chanukah:

*Another year [the rabbis] established them, and made them into yamim tovim with praise and thanksgiving.*

**Shabbat 21b**

לשנה אחרת קבעום ועשאום ימים טובים בהלל והודאה.  
**שבת כא:**

<sup>180</sup> Of course, even Purim was only established with the consent of the rabbis. Nevertheless, the personal initiative displayed by Esther and the residents of the unwalled cities remain central to the holiday's theme.

<sup>181</sup> For a famous (and controversial) elaboration of this theme, see Rav Dessler in *Michtav Me'Eliyahu*, Vol. 1 pgs. 75-77.

<sup>182</sup> In kabbalistic terms, Purim is associated with *איתעררותא דלתתא*, an awakening from below, as opposed to *איתעררותא דלעילא*, an awakening from above. In other words, the Jewish people awaken divine providence through their own initiative.

The character and celebration of Chanukah were not set down until “another year.” It was not the people but the rabbis who initiated the establishment of the holiday. We do not hear about the entire nation but about Yehuda Maccabi and his brothers going out to battle. The people as a whole did not repent; in fact, so far as we can tell, the Hellenizing Jews carried their assimilationist philosophy to the grave. All this confirms that Purim is more of a “bottom-up” holiday, as opposed to Chanukah, which is more “top-down.”

How does this thesis relate to our observation that Purim was established on the day of rest? In recognition of *klal yisrael's* active role in establishing the holiday, we continue to observe Purim in much the same way. We continue to observe the day of rest because that is what we have been doing since the very beginning. In this way we grant recognition to *klal yisrael's* unique role in establishing Purim.

We are now in position to understand a number of other phenomenon as well. According to one prominent view (Rabbenu Tam quoted in Rosh Megilla 1:1 and Ran 1b *be'Alfas*) we observe *Ta'anit Esther* on the thirteenth of Adar to simulate the emotions of the Jews immediately before departing for the battlefield. Once again we mark the role played by the Jews of that generation: just as they fasted and prayed before engaging the enemy, so too we fast and pray before reading the Megilla.

Perhaps we can now offer a novel resolution to another problem. Purim is unique among the Jewish holidays in that two dates have been set aside for the holiday – the fourteenth and fifteenth. Why does Purim break so sharply from general *Yom Tov* protocol? In light of the above the answer is clear: we continue to observe Purim in this unusual fashion simply because that's what the Jews did in that inaugural year.

We can also now explain a curious position among the *rishonim*. *Tosafot* (Megilla 4a s.v. *psak*) maintains that we do not recite the prayer of *al hanissim* during *Shmoneh Esrei* of Maariv because we have not yet read the Megilla. This is quite an unusual suggestion, and seems to be *sui generis* among the other *yamim tovim* of the year. Did anyone ever propose omitting *al hanissim* on the first night of Chanukah? Or leaving out *ya'aleh ve-yavo* on the first night of the *Shalosh Regalim*?<sup>183</sup> How are we to understand *Tosafot's* seemingly radical position? Perhaps we can explain that our observance of Purim is modeled after that of our forefathers: We do not celebrate Purim by reciting *al hanissim* until we first “take the initiative” by reading the Megilla and offering thanks to Hashem. Just as the original Purim was incomplete without the active participation of the Jews, so too our Purim is incomplete without our first reliving the miracle and offering praise and thanks to the Almighty.

Purim – and its unusual placement on the day of rest – thus highlights two crucial themes. First, as much as we hate the sin we nevertheless love the sinner, for all humans are created in the image of God. This principle dictates not only the details of the holidays but their timing as well,

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<sup>183</sup> The *halacha* that one who omits *ya'aleh ve-yavo* at night need not repeat *Shmoneh Esrei* (Berachot 30b, *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 422:1) is not germane to our discussion. First, no one suggests that even *lechatchila* one need not recite *ya'aleh ve-yavo* at night, only that one need not repeat *Shmoneh Esrei* for this omission. Second, that is a unique *halacha* based on the fact that *Beit Din* did not sanctify the new moon at night, and is therefore not connected to our discussion.

and is fundamental to all of Jewish philosophy and experience. Second, we must not only passively accept Hashem's commands but be proactive in seeking out religious opportunities. Let us not merely try to "keep up" with our religious responsibilities; instead we must identify ways in which we can take new steps to enrich our religious lives. By doing so we will follow the path blazed by our ancestors: "וקבל עליהם את אשר החלו לעשות", "they accepted that which they had already begun to perform."