

# Purim – Fulfilling Jewish Destiny

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Jewish tradition is rich with both volumes of wisdom and celebrations commemorating our history. While *sifrei Nach* (books of the Prophets and Scriptures) and other holidays, however, will become nullified when Moshiach comes, Purim and *Megillat Esther* are everlasting according to the Rambam:

*All the books of the Prophets and all the Scriptures will be nullified in the days of the Messiah except for Megillat Esther which will remain like the Five Books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah that will never be nullified ... The days of Purim will never be nullified.*

**Rambam, Hilchot Megilla 2:18**

כל ספרי הנביאים וכל הכתובים עתידין  
ליבטל לימות המשיח חוץ ממגילת אסתר  
והרי היא קיימת כחמשה חומשי תורה  
וכהלכות של תורה שבעל פה שאינן בטלין  
לעולם ... ימי הפורים לא יבטלו.  
רמב"ם, הלכות מגילה ב:יח

Why? What is it about Purim that the Rambam believes is so fundamental and that unlike other holidays it will continue to be observed forever? Clearly, Purim must represent certain fundamental values essential for Jewish existence that guarantees its lasting legacy.

To understand the characteristics essential to Jewish tradition, one must study the actions of Avraham, father of the Jewish people. When G-d chooses Avraham in *Parshat Lech Lecha*, He promises that Avraham will be a source of blessing to the world.<sup>10</sup> Avraham then proceeds to demonstrate through his actions how to fulfill that promise, starting with his own personal sacrifice when he picks up and leaves his birthplace to travel to the land that G-d has promised him. Avraham's sacrifice continues throughout the stories of Bereishit, culminating in the greatest personal sacrifice possible, giving up his long-awaited beloved child as a gift to G-d. In addition to personal sacrifice, Avraham also demonstrates recognition and knowledge of G-d. He recognizes that his life's mission is to fulfill *ratzon Hashem*, the will of G-d. G-d iterates this characteristic when He says about Avraham, *כי עתה ידעתי כי ירא אלקים אתה* (now I know that you fear the Lord) at the conclusion of the *Akeida* story.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Bereishit 12:3.

<sup>11</sup> Bereishit 22:12.

Righteousness is another fundamental characteristic ingrained in Avraham. He is an honest person who genuinely cares about the wellbeing of others.<sup>12</sup> In the text itself Avraham is referred to as an *ivri*, and as the midrash explains, he was on one side of the world while everyone else was on the other side.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the only time he is referred to with this epithet is in the context of the war between the four and five kings. After Sodom has been captured with all its inhabitants, a refugee from the war (a *palit*) comes to relay the news to Avraham HaIvri. Perhaps Avraham's uniqueness stems from his character traits as well as from his unique ideology. The refugee runs to Avraham because Avraham cares, and therefore is more likely to take action, which he does. Avraham's deep concern for others is further demonstrated through his reaction to G-d's announcement about the destruction of Sodom, when he argues with G-d in an attempt to save its people.<sup>14</sup> The transmission of this trait of righteousness is essential to Jewish destiny, as G-d, while contemplating sharing with Avraham the news of Sodom's imminent destruction, states endearingly:<sup>15</sup>

*For I have known him because he commands his sons and his household after him, that they should keep the way of the Lord to perform righteousness and justice.*

**Bereishit 18:19 (Judaica Press Translation)**

כי ידעתיו למען אשר יצוה את בניו ואת ביתו אחריו ושמרו דרך ה' לעשות צדקה ומשפט.  
בראשית יח:יט

This model of sacrifice, recognition of G-d, righteousness and transmission emerge in Moshe Rabbeinu's character as well. Moshe's personal sacrifices are clearly evident through his life's work of leading the Jewish people. His own family life falls to the wayside as he assumes that role.<sup>16</sup> Even from the start, he, like Avraham, must leave the comforts of his environment to embrace his G-d-given mission. Moshe's ultimate sacrifice is demonstrated at Har Sinai after *cheit ha'egel* (the sin of the golden calf) when he puts his own self and legacy on the line for the sake of Bnei Yisrael. When G-d states that he will destroy the Jews and appoint Moshe to a greater position with a different nation, Moshe responds with a strong defense for the Jews, and ends by stating:

*And now, if You forgive their sin. But if not, erase me now from Your book, which You have written.*

**Shemot 32:32 (Judaica Press Translation)**

ועתה אם תשא חטאתם ואם אין מחני נא מספרך אשר כתבת.  
שמות לב:לב

Moshe's recognition of G-d is indisputable as demonstrated through his intimate relationship with G-d and ability to speak with G-d "*panim el panim*" (face to face).

<sup>12</sup> See the introduction of the Netziv to Sefer Bereishit where he explains that the *sefer* (book) is referred to as *Sefer HaYashar* (the Book of the Just) due to the demonstrations of *yashrut* (justness) of the *avot* (patriarchs) with a particular emphasis on Avraham.

<sup>13</sup> Bereishit 14:13.

<sup>14</sup> Bereishit 18:23.

<sup>15</sup> Rashi comments in 18:17 that *כי ידעתיו* (for I have known him) is said in an endearing way – *lashon chibah* -- demonstrating G-d's approval of Avraham's behavior.

<sup>16</sup> See Shemot 4:24-26 and Bamidbar 12:1.

As far as righteousness goes, Moshe's character fits the mold. From his early days, his concern for people and lack of tolerance for injustice is quite clear. "ויגדל משה ויצא אל אחיו וירא בסבלותם" – and Moshe grew up and went out to his brethren to see "in their suffering." "*B'sivlotam*", Rashi explains means that he looked deeply into their plight, empathized and was distressed over it.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the only incidents we see Moshe involved in before he is chosen by G-d, are incidents involving injustice.<sup>18</sup> Not only is he a champion of justice for random individuals, he becomes a champion of justice par excellence for Bnei Yisrael as well. Finally, Moshe Rabbeinu, our teacher, the transmitter of Torah, fulfills his greatest role as the source of the Torah tradition and manifests the transmission piece of Jewish destiny as well, as we know, "תורה צוה לנו משה" (Moshe commanded us regarding the Torah).<sup>19</sup>

A close study of the story of Purim reveals that Mordechai and Esther, too, embody the four characteristics prevalent in their ancestors that include sacrifice, recognition of G-d, righteousness and transmission. They are clearly willing to sacrifice their own lives for the sake of the Jewish people, as Mordechai urges Esther to go to the king on behalf of the Jews and warns her, "אל תדמי בנפשיך" – do not imagine that you will be able to escape. Esther responds by agreeing to go and says, "כאשר אבדתי אבדתי" – if I perish then I will perish.<sup>20</sup> During this conversation between Mordechai and Esther, the turning point in the Megilla, recognition of G-d is evident in the way the story unfolds. When Mordechai tells Esther, "ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת" "ומי יודע אם לעת כזאת" (how do you know if you attained the kingdom for a moment like this?), he is essentially stating that there are greater forces at play here beneath the surface. The entire theme of Purim is the recognition of G-d's role in the world, even when hidden.

Mordechai and Esther, like Avraham and Moshe, also stand up against injustice. Mordechai, called "*ish yehudi*" (a Jewish person) embodies the same "Jewish" trait of defending *mishpat* (justice) that the original "Yehudi" (Yehuda) did when he stood up to Yosef to defend Binyamin.<sup>21</sup> Mordechai not only saves the Jews from Haman's injustice against them, he also saves Achashverosh from those plotting against him. Righteousness also plays a large role in this story. The Megilla ends with Mordechai using his newly appointed political position to reach out and connect with others, "דורש טוב לעמו ודובר שלום לכל זרעו" – he sought the good of his people and was concerned with the welfare of his posterity.<sup>22</sup> In fact, half of the mitzvot that one is obligated to perform on Purim relate to the betterment of our fellow Jews. The mitzvah of *mishloach manot* is performed for the purpose of connecting people, and *matanot la'evyonim* is commanded to help others as well. As portrayed in the previous models of leadership, transmission is the final and lasting piece of the Purim story. Even after the drama ends, the Megilla is not complete until its transmission is assured both for the contemporary Jews at that

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<sup>17</sup> Shemot 2:11 and Rashi ad loc.

<sup>18</sup> Shemot 2:11-13, 2:17.

<sup>19</sup> Devarim 33:4.

<sup>20</sup> Esther 4:14-16.

<sup>21</sup> Bereishit 44:18. Note the similarity between this approach and that of Avraham when he approached G-d to defend the people of Sodom in Bereishit 18:23.

<sup>22</sup> Esther 10:3.

time and for future generations. "קימו וקבלו היהודים עליהם ועל זרעם" - the Jews confirmed and undertook this upon themselves and their descendants, followed by "וימי פורים האלה לא יעברו" - "and these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews nor shall their remembrance perish from their descendants."<sup>23</sup> The entire story is still known and celebrated today as a result of Mordechai's and Esther's transmission, as the Megilla records, "ומאמר אסתר קים דברי הפורים האלה ונכתב בספר" - Esther's ordinance validated these regulations for Purim, and it was recorded in the book.<sup>24</sup>

While Mordechai and Esther demonstrate the characteristics that create Jewish leadership, Amalek, represented here by Haman, demonstrates the antithesis of those values. Amalek, too, is willing to make personal sacrifices, however, it does so, not for the wellbeing of others, but for destructive purposes. When Amalek attacked the newly freed Jews in the desert soon after their exodus from Egypt, the Torah states, "אשר קרך בדרך" - that he happened upon you on the way. Rashi points out one way to understand this idea is that Amalek cooled off the red-hot Jews who had decimated the Egyptian empire, as if they jumped into a burning hot bath to cool it off, even though they got burned in the process. They were willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of making the Jews vulnerable and open to attack from others. Amalek also represents the antithesis of recognition of G-d. "אשר קרך בדרך" also means, according to Rashi, "לשון מקרה" - happenstance.<sup>25</sup> They believed events are circumstantial, with no Divine providence, thereby allowing them to attack the Jews and, unlike the other nations, disregard the Divine events that transpired in Egypt. The Torah clearly states, "ולא ירא אלקים" - they did not fear G-d. Not only is Amalek the antithesis of *yirat Elokim*, fear of G-d, it is also the antithesis of righteousness and concern for others. While the models of Jewish tradition demonstrate care and concern for others, Amalek demonstrates promoting harm. The nation attacked the Jews when they were most vulnerable, "ואתה עייף ויגע" - when you were faint and exhausted. Interestingly, the verses immediately preceding the attack of Amalek are all about *mishpat*, the Jewish obligation to promote justice and the repulsiveness in the eyes of G-d to a lack of justice.<sup>26</sup> The Torah seems to be contrasting the Jewish value of *mishpat* with the diametrically opposing values of Amalek.

Finally, while transmission is a key part of Jewish destiny, Amalek, once again, represents its antithesis. While Jewish tradition and Torah are passed down from generation to generation, Amalek must be forgotten. The Torah exhorts that "תמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים" - you should wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heaven.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the battle between the Jewish nation and the nation of Amalek becomes part of our transmission through generations, as the Torah states in Shemot when Amalek first attacked:

*The Lord said to Moses, Inscribe this [as] a memorial in the book, and recite it into Joshua's ears, that I will surely obliterate*

ויאמר ה' אל משה כתב זאת זכרון בספר ושים באזני יהושע כי מחה

<sup>23</sup> Esther 9:27-29.

<sup>24</sup> Esther 9:32.

<sup>25</sup> Devarim 25:17-18.

<sup>26</sup> Devarim 25:15-17.

<sup>27</sup> Devarim 25:19.

*the remembrance of Amalek from beneath the heavens.*  
**Shemot 17:14 (Judaica Press Translation)**

אמחה את זכר עמלק מתחת השמים.  
שמות יז:יד

The perek ends with the demand that, "מלחמה לה' בעמלק מדור דור" – that G-d maintains a war with Amalek from generation to generation.<sup>28</sup> Both the Megilla and the story of Amalek are recorded for posterity, but while the former is for the sake of remembering something positive enabling its memory to last forever, the latter is for the sake of wiping out the memory of something negative.

Purim is all about Jewish destiny. The story clearly demonstrates the most fundamental Jewish values. For generations, we Jews celebrate Purim as a model of our legacy and a model of the antithesis of that legacy. The transmission of the story ensures that the moral lessons gleaned will never be forgotten. Perhaps that is the reason that the Rambam believes that "ימי פורים לא יבטלו," "The days of Purim will never be nullified. Purim, capturing the models of Avraham, Moshe, Mordechai and Esther, embodies perhaps the greatest example of the fulfillment of Jewish destiny.

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<sup>28</sup> Shemot 17:14-16.