

# What's in a name? A “LOT”!!!

According to the midrash,<sup>1</sup> when HaShem created Adam HaRishon, He endowed him with a level of wisdom that surpassed all of the other creations, including the angels. To demonstrate man's wisdom, HaShem asked both the angels and Adam to assign names to all of the animals. While the angels struggled, Adam was quickly able to name each animal in a way that accurately depicted its true essence. Upon completion of this task, Adam was given the task of naming himself, and was even asked to ascribe a title to God.<sup>2</sup> From this midrash, we see how choosing an appropriate name is by no means a simple act. It requires great insight and keen understanding, so that the name captures the essence of an object in just one word.

With that in mind, we must look into the name “Purim” (literally “Lots”) and wonder: How exactly does this name encapsulate the essence of the holiday? At first glance, the lots of Haman<sup>3</sup> were not a central part of the story. Their goal was merely to determine the date for the massacre of the Jews. The massacre itself was

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already set to happen in Haman's mind. Why didn't Mordechai and Esther choose a name that relates more to the essence of the story? For example, there were two letters concerning the Jews sent by Achashveirosh to his entire empire, the first calling for our demise and the second granting us permission to defend ourselves. Those letters appear to be much more significant than the lots cast by Haman, so why not call the holiday *Chag Ha'Igeres* — the Holiday of the Letter? Similarly, Achashveirosh hands over his signet ring on these same two occasions, first to Haman to permit him to write as he wishes,<sup>4</sup> and then to Mordechai and Esther, so that they could counter Haman's plans.<sup>5</sup> Why not call the holiday *Chag HaTaba'as* — the Holiday of the Ring? And perhaps the most accurate and obvious name for the holiday would be *Chag HaHipuch* — the Holiday of Reversal, for it would relate all of the various reversals that took place in the Megillah, including the two just mentioned, along with many others — Haman pulling Mordechai on the King's horse instead of the other way around; Haman hanging on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordechai; the Jews of Shushan rejoicing on the day that was originally destined to be the day of their demise. And yet Esther and Mordechai chose

the name Purim over all of the other possibilities, just because Haman used “lots” to determine the date of our destruction?<sup>6</sup> What is the greater meaning behind these lots? How do they embody the essence of the holiday? We will return to these questions after we analyze an even more perplexing question about the name “Purim.”

Many are familiar with the play on words, going all of the way back to the *Tikunei Zohar* that Yom HaKipurim is a day that is like Purim — “*ke-Purim*.”<sup>7</sup> The difficulty in this comparison is readily apparent, as one would be hard-pressed to find two holidays more different from one another than Purim and Yom HaKipurim. Purim is a day of feast, Yom Kippur a day of fast. Purim celebrates our physical salvation from the hatred of Haman,<sup>8</sup> while Yom Kippur offers spiritual redemption and purity from our Father in Heaven. On Purim, we read the Megillah, which omits the name of God, while on Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol proclaims the *Sheim Hamephorash* ten times during his *avodah*.<sup>9</sup>

But as we take a closer look at these two holidays, we see that they do actually share some uncanny resemblances. Yom Kippur is indeed a fast day, but it is introduced by a day

of feast.<sup>10</sup> Purim, on the other hand, is a day of feast, but is preceded by Taanis Esther. Consequently, the 48-hour periods surrounding each holiday include both feast and famine.

Even the storylines of the two holidays have a common theme at their core. In the story of Purim, a representative of the Jewish nation (Esther) enters the king's inner chamber to plead on behalf of the nation, and the king responds by reversing an earlier decree, allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Similarly, on Yom HaKipurim, a representative of the Jewish nation (the Kohen Gadol) enters **The King's** inner chamber (the Kodesh Hakodashim) to appeal on behalf of the nation, and **The King** responds by reversing a decree of punishment and giving the nation a chance for a positive year.<sup>11</sup>

But perhaps the most unique common feature of both holidays is the “lots” that play a role in determining the fate of the Jewish Nation. We have already discussed how Haman relied on lots to choose the date for his planned massacre of the Jews. On Yom HaKipurim, it is the Kohen Gadol who makes use of lots to determine the fate of the nation's two he-goats, essential components for the nation's atonement. One goat draws the lot of “La'Shem” and is brought as a korban, with its blood sprinkled before the Aron Hakodesh in the Kodesh Hakodashim. The other goat, which draws the lot “La'Azazel,” is sent away from the Mikdash, on a journey through the wilderness, only to be thrown off a cliff. Regarding both lots, one can ask why the lots were really necessary. Why couldn't the Kohen Gadol forgo the lottery and instead determine on his own which goat was for HaShem and which was for Azazel? We also need to understand why Haman didn't want to simply choose his own date, rather than rely on a lottery.

Perhaps the meaning behind the lotteries of the two holidays is that in each case, there was a decision being made whose significance was too far-reaching for humans to make on their own, and input was needed from the heavens. On Yom HaKipurim, atonement is at stake, and atonement is something that belongs in the hands of HaShem alone. David Hamelech teaches us this in Sefer Tehilim (130:4): “*Ki im'cha ha'selicha, l'ma'an tivarei*” — “Forgiveness lies (only) with You, and this makes you revered.” It cannot be up to the Kohen Gadol to determine which animal is brought as a korban and which is thrown off a cliff because



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atonement belongs in the domain of HaShem. The Gemara<sup>12</sup> tells us regarding King Menashe — who was the epitome of evil for 22 years toward the end of Bayis Rishon — that when he attempted to repent while in captivity, the *midas hadin* (strict judgment) was unwilling to accept him favorably. However, HaShem dug for Menashe a secret tunnel so that his tefilos and teshuva could be received by HaShem alone, and no one else in the Heavenly Court would have a say in the matter. Conversely, when Moshe Rabbeinu davened at the end of his life to be granted permission to enter Eretz Yisrael, the midrash<sup>13</sup> says that Moshe's tefilos were so powerful that they caused the earth to quake and pierce through the Heavens as swiftly as a sword cutting through cloth. HaShem then issued a command to the angels to lock all gates to the Heavenly Courts, to ensure that Moshe's tefilos would not be received at all. Clearly, we cannot comprehend all that is at stake regarding forgiveness. How could Menashe's pleas enter through a secret tunnel, while Moshe Rabbeinu's supplications could not find any open gates? All we can do is proclaim "*Ki im'cha ha'selicha, l'ma'an tivarei.*" Perhaps this is what HaShem is teaching us by insisting that there be lots to determine the fate of the two he-goats of Yom Hakipurim and by extension, the fate of the nation and their atonement.

Just as the fate of the nation hangs in

the balance on every Yom Kippur, our fate was also hanging in the balance during the times of Purim. Haman was a descendant of Amalek, a nation whose mission was to annihilate the Jewish people. However, since the time of Shaul's conquering Agag Melech Amalek, and as long as the Jews were living in Israel, Am Yisrael was simply too powerful for Amalek to consider an attack. That changed with the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash and our exile, where we found ourselves without an army and unprotected. Haman also thought that he had an even more significant advantage with the Jews in exile. He thought that the Jewish God was also vulnerable at this point. According to the midrash,<sup>14</sup> when Haman presented his idea of a massacre to Achashveirosh, the king was at first terrified of the plan, out of fear that he would be made to suffer like Pharaoh or Sancheiriv at the hands of the Jewish God. But Haman convinced him otherwise with the argument that the Jewish God was old at this point and had already been defeated by Nevuchadnetzar. There would be no reason to fear. Perhaps this mentality will help us understand why Haman elected to use a lottery to determine the date of the Jewish downfall. Haman wanted to go out of his way to use a method that involved the Heavens, one that the Jews themselves used to use at times when God responded to their prayers, to demonstrate that this Heavenly

assistance was now gone. The lottery was a mockery of both the Jewish people and of God, showing everyone that the Jewish God was no longer in control of the fate of the Jewish people as He once was.

When God saved the Jewish people on Purim (albeit in a more hidden way than He had done on previous occasions), He proved to Haman that the fate of the Jewish people is *always* in God's hands. There will never be any signs of weakness or old age. In fact, according to the midrash quoted above,<sup>14</sup> when Mordechai himself had doubts as to whether the Jews would indeed be saved, he entered the beis midrash and asked three children to recite a verse that they learned that day. The third child's verse was "*V'ad ziknah ani hu, v'ad seivah ani esbol*" — "Through old age I am the same, and through elderly years I will endure."<sup>15</sup> When Mordechai heard this, his faith was reignited and he knew that there would be a future for the Jewish people. "*Revach va'hatzalah ya'amod la'Yehudim.*"<sup>16</sup>

The lots of Purim became the most significant part of the story because they represented Haman's attitude that God was no longer capable of protecting us, and God's response that He would always be there for us, even during our exile. In fact, as the Malbim explains, even the lots themselves had a hint from HaShem to Haman that He was very much involved in all that was transpiring. The lots were cast on

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the 13th of Nissan, and were first to determine a day of the month (with the 14th of the month being the first possibility), and then the particular month (with the current month of Nissan as the first option) for our demise. When the lots landed on the 13th of Adar, which is the 12th month of the year, this was the very last possible day out of the entire year that could have been selected. This was a clear message to Haman that Hashem was very much involved in the fate of His people.

The lots of Purim and the lots of Yom HaKipurim teach us an identical message — that the fate of Am Yisrael is always in the hands of HaShem. Even when we sin, He will dig tunnels for our prayers. And even when we are in exile, “Behold the Guardian of Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

1 Bereishis Rabbah 17:4.

2 Bereishis Rabbah, *ibid*: [God asked Adam] “What is your name?” He responded, “I would like to be called Adam

because I was created from the adamah (earth).” [God asked] “And what shall I be called?” He responded, “I would like to call You Ado-nai (my Master) because You are the Master of all Your creations.

ואתה מה שמך? אמר לו אני נאה להקרא אדם, שנבראתי מן האדמה. ואני מה שמך? א”ל לך נאה להקראות אדני שאתה אדון לכל בריותך

3 Esther 3:7.

4 Esther 3:10.

5 Esther 8:9.

6 Esther 9:26.

7 Tikunei Zohar, Tikun #21:

Purim is named after Yom HaKipurim, which will one day be a day that is transformed from a day of affliction to a day of enjoyment.

פורים אתקריאת על שם יום הכפורים דעתידין לאתענגא ביה ולשנויי ליה מענוי לענג

8 See Mishna Berurah 670:6, who notes that Purim’s celebration focuses on physical enjoyment because Haman’s decree called for the physical annihilation of the Jews. By contrast, Chanukah celebrates salvation from a decree whose goal was to cause spiritual assimilation. As such, the celebration is of a spiritual nature — through the recitation of Hallel.

9 Three times in each viduy. Each viduy is recited three times. It is recited an additional time, when the Kohen Gadol announces “Se’ir

La’Shem.”

10 Pesachim 68b:

Anyone who eats on the ninth [of Tishrei], the Torah considers it as if one fasted on the ninth and tenth.

כל האוכל ושותה בתשעה בן, מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתענה תשיעי ועשירי

11 Tikunei Zohar, Tikun #21:

At that time, she adorned the clothing of atonement (a reference to the clothing of the Kohen Gadol), the verse states of her, “Esther adorned the clothing of royalty,” and with those clothes she entered the Inner Sanctum.

וכד אתקשטת קדמיה בלבושין שפירין, דאינון לבושי כפרה אתקרי, ציץ דיליה, מצנפת דיליה, אבנט דיליה, אייה כלילא מארבע בגדי לבן מסטרא דימינא, ומארבע בגדי זהב מסטרא דשמאלא, בההוא זמנא דאתקשטת באלין לבושין דכפרה, אתמר בה ותלבש אסתר מלכות ובהון עאלת לפני ולפנים, הדא הוא דכתב ותעמוד בחצר בית המלך הפנימית, ובהון נשאה חן בעיניו, ורוא דמלה “וראיתיה לזכור ברית עולם” ומיד “ה’ שמעה ה’ סלחה ה’ הקשיבה ועשה, אל תאחר

12 Sanhedrin 103.

13 Devarim Rabbah 11:10.

14 Esther Rabbah 7:13.

15 Yeshayahu 46:4.

16 Esther 4:14.

17 Tehillim 121:4.

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