

Purim: From the Grassroots Up

We generally tend to view the holidays of Hanukkah and Purim in a similar light, since both were created by rabbinic authority. These two *hagim* stand in contrast to biblical holidays such as Pesah and Sukkot, whose origins are rooted in the direct command of God. The truth is, placing Hanukkah and Purim in the same basket does not do justice to the reality that emerges from the sources. In a Hebrew essay written two decades ago about these two rabbinic holidays,¹ I explored the many distinctions that emerge through a closer look at the sugyot and halakhic discussions in Rishonim and Aharonim. The majority of this essay was later translated and published in English a number of years later.² The last section, however, dealing with a foundational distinction in the origin of the respective holidays, was not translated at the time. Below is an English version of part of that last section.

A.

According to Talmudic law, inhabitants of walled cities whose walls existed from the period of Joshua bin Nun celebrate Purim and the reading of the Megillah on the 15th day of Adar, as they did in antiquity in Shushan, while inhabitants of unwalled cities, i.e. most of the world, celebrate Purim on the 14th day of Adar. The Mishna, toward the latter part of the second chapter of Tractate Megilla, states:



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בן עיר שהלך לכרך ובן כרך שהלך לעיר אם עתיד לחזור למקומו קורא כמקומו ואם לאו קורא עמהן.

An inhabitant of a walled city — ben kerakh — who went to an unwalled city (before Purim), or an inhabitant of an unwalled city — ben ir — who went to a walled city (before Purim) — if he will be returning home, he reads in his home town; if not, he reads with them.”

Megilla 19a



Rabba offers the following explanation ad loc:

אמר רבא לא שנו ולא שעתיד לחזור בלילי
ד' אבל אין עתיד לחזור בלילי ארבעה עשר
קורא עמהן.

This applies only when he is going to return on the night of the 14th. If he will not be returning on the night of the 14th, he reads with them.

The Rishonim are divided in their

understanding of Rabba's words. Rashi, and those who subscribe to his interpretation, maintain that the critical question, in Rabba's view, is where the person is *actually located* at daybreak of the 14th. Rashi writes:

לא שנו - דבן כרך שהלך לעיר ועתיד לחזור למקומו קורא בחמשה עשר ולא בארבעה עשר: אלא שעתיד לחזור בליל ארבעה עשר - אם קודם עמוד השחר יצא מן העיר הוא דקתני שאינו צריך לקרות עמהן בלילי י"ד - אע"פ שעודנו שם הואיל וביום לא יהיה שם אין זה אפילו פרוז בן יומו.

“This applies” — An inhabitant of a walled city who goes to an unwalled city, and is going to return home, reads on the 15th and not on the 14th. But if he will be returning on the night of the 14th — if he leaves the city before daybreak — then he does not have to read with them on the night of the 14th, even though he is still there. Since he will no longer be there in the daytime, he is not even a ‘paruz ben yomo’ [‘city-dweller for a day’].

It is clear from Rashi's language that the decisive issue is where this person will be on the day of the 14th (if we are speaking of an inhabitant of a walled city who visited an unwalled city). The same interpretation is offered by R. Zerahya Ha-Levi (*Ba'al ha-Maor* 6a in the pages of the Rif).

R. Yitzhak Alfasi (Rif) (ad loc.), in his halakhot, however, offers a different interpretation. The Rif seems to suggest that the critical halakhic consideration here is the person's intention: was he intending to return, or was he not? If he had intended to return, then even if for some reason he ended up staying, he is still regarded as a resident of his original walled city, and not as a *paruz ben yomo*. Only if his intention had originally been to stay in that city until daytime of the 14th do the laws of a *paruz ben yomo* apply to him.

At first glance, the Rif's interpretation seems quite strange: what difference does it make what this person's intention was? If he is physically located in the city, then seemingly he belongs to the category of *paruz ben yomo*. Indeed, the *Ba'al ha-Maor* questions the Rif's reasoning.

R. Moshe Ben Nahman (Ramban) defends the Rif in his *Milhamot Hashem* ad loc, writing:

אמר הכותב אפשר שלא נתבררו לו אבל דברים נכונים הם ... וכן מצינו בכל מקום שאין נותנין עליו חומרי מקום שהוא שם אלא כשאין דעתו לחזור ואפי' עמד שם כמה שלא לדעת לא עלה לו.

Perhaps [the words of the Rif] were not clear to [the Ba'al ha-Maor], but they are correct... Likewise we find that in no instance do we place upon a person the restrictions of the place where he is except where it is not his intention to return, and even if he stays in that place for several days without having previously intended to do so, he is not considered as staying there.

Ramban draws our attention to a discussion in *Massekhet Pesachim* (50-51). Let us review the main points. The Mishna there states:

מקום שנהגו לעשות מלאכה בערבי פסחים עד חצות עושין מקום שנהגו שלא לעשות אין עושין ההולך ממקום שעושין למקום שאין עושין או ממקום שאין עושין למקום שעושין נותנין עליו חומרי מקום שיצא משם וחומרי מקום שהלך לשם.

In a place where it is customary to perform melakha on erev Pesach up to midday, one may do so. In a place where it is customary not to, one may not. If a person goes from a place where people do melakha to a place where they do not, or from a place where they do not do melakha to a place where they do, we place upon him the restrictions of the place from whence he departed and the restrictions of the place to which he went.

In its discussion of the Mishna, the Gemara cites a case that once happened:

כי אתא רבה בר בר חנה אכל דאייתרא עול לגביה רב עוירא סבא ורבה בריה דרב הונא כיון דחזינהו כסייה מינייהו אתו ואמרו ליה לאבבי אמר להו שווינכו ככותאי ורבה בר בר חנה לית ליה הא דתנן נותנין עליו חומרי המקום שיצא משם וחומרי המקום שהלך לשם ... רב אשי אמר אפילו תימא מא"י לבבל הני מילי היכא דאין דעתו לחזור ורבה בר בר חנה דעתו לחזור הוה.

When Rabba bar Bar Chana came, he ate of the stomach fat [Rashi: "The fat in the curve of the stomach, for the stomach is curved like a bow. The fat situated there was permitted to those living in the Land of Israel, but those living in Babylon treated it as forbidden."] Rav Avira the Elder and Rabba, son of R. Huna, visited him. As soon as he saw them, he hid [the fat] from them. When they told this to Abaye, he said to them, "He has treated you like Cuthites." But did Rabba bar Bar Chana not act in accordance with what we have learned: "We place upon him the restrictions of the place from

whence he departed and the restrictions of the place to which he went"? ... Rav Ashi said: "You may even say [that this applies also when a person goes] from Eretz Yisrael to Babylonia, but only where he had no intention of returning, whereas Rabba bar Bar Chana intended to return."

Pesachim 51a

We see, then, that according to Rav Ashi's view concerning local customs, a person is subjected to the restrictions of the place to which he went only if he had not intended to return to his original place. Ramban therefore draws a comparison between the reading of the Megilla and the law of a *paruz ben yomo* and the laws of different local customs appearing in *Massekhet Pesachim*. Here too, he maintains, only when a villager intends to stay over in the city does the law of a *paruz ben yomo* apply to him, and this is the basis for the opinion of the Rif.

But here we must ask, what sort of comparison is this? Seemingly, there is no connection between the rules governing the adoption of **local custom**, on one hand, and a **law** that is *de-rabbanan*, such as the reading of the Megilla, on the other. On what basis is this comparison being drawn?

It would appear that the Ramban's explanation of the Rif sheds new light on the basis for the rabbinical enactment concerning Purim and the source of the obligation.

B.

In order to understand this, we must have another look at how the days of Purim were established, as described in the Megilla itself:

The first stage was the year of the battle itself:

וּשְׂאֵר הַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּמַדִּינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ נִקְהְלוּ
וְעָמְדוּ עַל נַפְשָׁם וְנוּחַ מֵאֲבִיבֵיהֶם וְהָרַג בְּשִׁנְאֵיהֶם
חֲמִשָּׁה וְשִׁבְעִים אָלֶיךָ וּבְבִזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת יָדָם.
בְּיוֹם שְׁלֹשָׁה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אָדָר וְנוּחַ בְּאַרְבָּעָה
עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְעָשָׂה אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה
וְהַיְהוּדִים אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוֹשָׁן נִקְהְלוּ בְּשִׁלְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ
וּבְאַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְנוּחַ בְּחִמְשָׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ וְעָשָׂה
אֹתוֹ יוֹם מְשֻׁתָּה וְשִׂמְחָה.

And the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together and stood up for themselves, and had rest from their enemies, and slew of their foes... on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

Esther 9:16-18

Following the tremendous victory, the Jews celebrated the miracle and made it a spontaneous day of feasting — in the unwalled towns on the 14th, and in the walled cities on the 15th.³

The second stage was in the years that followed, as recorded in the Megilla:

עַל כֵּן הַיְהוּדִים הַפְּרָזִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת
עָשִׂים אֶת יוֹם אַרְבָּעָה עָשָׂר לְחֹדֶשׁ אָדָר שְׂמִיחָה
וּמְשֻׁתָּה וְיוֹם טוֹב וּמְשֻׁלֹּחַ מְנוּחַת אִישׁ לְרֵעֵהוּ:
Therefore the Jews of the unwalled towns, who dwell in the unwalled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and holiday, and of sending choice portions to one another.

Esther 9:19

The plain meaning of the text suggests that it was a grassroots initiative on the part of the people themselves to celebrate the events of Purim in the years that followed. Indeed, this is Ramban's explicit understanding in his *Hiddushim* on *Massekhet Megilla* 2b.

The third stage was when Mordekhai

and Esther and their *beit din* set down the days of Purim for all future generations as a *takkanat Hazal* for all intents and purposes. This stage is recorded in the text with the words,

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֶרְדֳּכָי אֶת הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה ... לְהִיּוֹת
עֲשִׂים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה כְּכַתְּבָם וְכַזְּמָנָם
בְּכָל שָׁנָה וְשָׁנָה ... וְתִכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה בֵּת
אֲבִיחַיִל וּמֶרְדֳּכָי הַיְהוּדִי אֶת כָּל תְּקוּף לְקוּמֵי אֶת
אֲגֻרַת הַפּוּרִים הַזֵּאת הַשְּׁנִיָּה:

And Mordekhai wrote these things... That these days should be remembered and observed throughout every generation... Then Queen Esther, daughter of Avihayil, and Mordekhai the Jew, wrote with all emphasis to confirm this second letter of Purim.

Esther 9:20-29

We might therefore argue that even when Hazal set down the holiday for all future generations, they essentially left it in the same form as the original feast and celebration. **In other words, since this holiday began as a custom among Klal Yisrael, even when it was formalized as a rabbinical enactment, some elements of the rules pertaining to custom still applied.**

A review of the discussion in *Megilla* 19a, surrounding the law of a *paruz ben yomo*, shows that it is based on the verse, “Therefore the Jews...”:

אָמַר רַבָּא מֵנָּה אֲמִינָה לֵה דְכֵתִיב עַל כֵּן
הַיְהוּדִים הַפְּרוּזִים הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת
מְכַדִּי כְּתִיב הַיְהוּדִים הַפְּרוּזִים לְמָה לִּי לְמִיכְתֹּב
הַיֹּשְׁבִים בְּעָרֵי הַפְּרוּזוֹת הָאֵלֶּה קָמַל דְּפִרוּזוֹן
יּוֹמוֹ נִקְרָא פְּרוּז.

“Rabba said: From where do I derive this ruling [governing where a person who is not in his usual place must read the Megilla, depending on whether or not he intends to return in the night]? Because it is written, ‘Therefore the Jews of the villages who dwell in the unwalled

towns...’ See now: It is written, ‘the Jews of the unwalled towns.’ Why, then, must it also say, ‘who dwell in the unwalled towns’? This teaches us that one who is an inhabitant for one day [paruz ben yomo] is called an inhabitant of the unwalled town.”

It turns out, then, that the source of the law of the *paruz ben yomo* is from the verse that appears in the second stage — when all of Israel began to observe the days of Purim of their own accord. Therefore, we must understand that the law of *paruz ben yomo* is based on the perception of Purim as a day molded by custom, and that the laws pertaining to custom apply to it.

Endnotes

1 “Mah bein Hanukkah le-Purim,” *Alon Shvut* #051.

2 “Hanukkah and Purim: A Study of Their Differences” *Alei Etzion* #4.

3 We note the possibility that in that first year, the Jews observed Purim as a law having biblical origin (*de-oraita*) — as the *Sheiltot* maintains. *Sheilta* 26 reads: “For the House of Israel is obligated to give thanks and praise to God at the time when a miracle is performed for them, as it is written, ‘Praise the Lord, all nations; praise Him, all peoples!’ (Tehillim 117).”

The Netziv, in his *Ha’amek Davar*, explains: “At the time when the miracle happened, but not on that day every year [thereafter], for there is no biblical basis for that... Similarly, it is clear that the mitzvot of Chanuka at the time that it happened were *de-oraita*, while in our times they are *de-rabbanan*.”