We all know the story of the Megillah. We know of Achashveirosh’s party, Haman’s plan, and Esther’s bravery. We know that everything turns on its head, vnahafoch-hu, resulting in a miraculous salvation for Am Yisrael. We know about celebrating our victory through a festive meal, sharing this celebration with others through matanot la’evyonim and mishloach manot, and recounting the miracle by reading the Megillah. However, one of the most important aspects of the holiday of Purim seems to live below the radar, out of the public eye.

Every holiday on our calendar has a mitzva that encapsulates the spiritual significance of the day. Rosh Hashana has the shofar, Sukkot the sukkah, Chanukah the lights, Pesach the matzah, and Shavuot the Torah. What can we point to on Purim? Where does the essence of the holiday lie? Many1 seek to explain the essence of our celebration of Purim by comparing it to the other rabbinic celebration — Chanukah. Chanukah is all about the spiritual. The Greeks sought to eradicate our religion, so our celebration centers around imitating the kindling of lights in the Beit Hamikdash, a ritual response representing the spiritual. By contrast, Purim is all about the physical. Haman tried to physically annihilate our people, so our celebration centers around a feast (eating, sharing, and providing for those less fortunate).

Others2 reach the same conclusion that Purim is about the physical, through a comparison to Yom Kippur. Since Yom HaKippurim implies that Yom Kippur is a day “similar to” Purim (ki-Purim), the days must be similar yet at odds. Yom Kippur is an extreme day focused solely on our spiritual existence, even prohibiting all forms of physical pleasure. Purim similarly swings the balance the other way, focusing on eating and drinking wine — essentially rendering us as physical a being as possible.

I posit that while both of these comparisons shed light on aspects of Purim, neither is successful at fully uncovering its essence. In order to truly understand Purim’s significance, we need to compare it to a very different holiday. The story of Purim really begins years before Haman was ever born.

The Gemara, in Shabbat 88a, tells us that when the Jewish People received the Torah, they were forced to accept it. It wasn’t until the Purim story that the Jewish People accepted the Torah willingly:

And they stood at the lowermost part of the mount” (Exodus 19:17). Rabbi Avdimi bar Hama bar Hasa said: [the verse] teaches that the Holy One, Blessed be He, overturned the mountain above them like a barrel, and said to them: If you accept the Torah, excellent, and if not, there will be your burial. Rav Aha bar Yaakov said: From here is a substantial caveat to [the obligation to fulfill] the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted

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it in the time of Ahasuerus, as it is written: “They ordained and took upon them…” (Esther 9:27); they ordained what they had already taken upon themselves.

However, we understand the details of the story, the Gemara is clearly conveying that Purim represents the end of the process we began at Har Sinai. Somehow, our acceptance of the Torah on Shavuot was lacking and the acceptance at the time of Purim cemented our relationship with Torah. One suggestion is that our acceptance at Har Sinai lacked a true aspect of Free Will. After all, how could a nation of slaves witness miracles and a level of revelation that future prophets could not even match, and then turn around and say no to G-d? Were they really in a position to think, consider, and deny Hashem’s request? The overt revelation of Hashem’s presence and hand in the world left them in awe, and did not afford them the ability to choose of their own free will. It was an acceptance, but one borne out of yirah.

Purim, however, provided exactly the circumstances necessary for a full and free acceptance of the Torah me’ahava. Throughout the Megillah, Hashem’s name is not mentioned once. Hashem’s presence was not overt, it was hidden (hester panim). Am Yisrael could easily have explained away the events of Purim as simply a product of human bravery, but they didn’t. Toward the end of the Megillah, Esther 8:16, we say aloud:

לייהדועים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר

The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor.

The reaction of Am Yisrael to the salvation from Haman’s decree was to identify Hashem as the source of their salvation. But that was not the end of their enlightenment. They realized that Hashem was not just responsible for this incredible turn of events; they came to understand that the hand of Hashem is behind so many aspects of their lives. The Gemara, Megillah 16b, provides a deeper understanding of this verse: Ora, simcha, sasson, and yikar refer not merely to light and expressions of joy but to Torah and certain touchstone mitzvot:

“אורותי והרנה ושמחתי ואת טוב ששמתי
ואמלתי…יורה אלי פל意義…”

“Light”; this is referring to the Torah… “Gladness” [simcha]; this is referring to the Festivals… “Joy” [sasson]; this is referring to circumcision… “Honor”; this is referring to phylacteries.

The incredible, yet hidden, hand of Hashem guiding their salvation brought the Jews to realize that Hashem’s presence was influencing them on a regular basis, and that Hashem was always with them through Torah and mitzvot. The source of physical light in the world may be the sun, but their spiritual light, their sense of purpose and meaning, comes from the Torah. This epiphany, seeing the yad Hashem, allowed them to recommit and fully accept the Torah. Through seeing and acknowledging Hashem’s role in the world and the role of Torah and mitzvot, without the overt revelation to “complicate” their judgement, Am Yisrael’s relationship with Torah

If Purim is really about recommitting to Torah, then why does limud haTorah not play a prominent role in our celebration of Purim the way it does on Shavuot?


While the Rama, *Orach Chaim* 695:2, does encourage us to learn a little before beginning the *seudah*, Torah is clearly not central to our observance of Purim. Here too, we need to focus on the way *yisra'el* came to their epiphany — not through overt revelation, as we experienced on Shavuot, but through noticing the subtle *yad Hashem*. If we take this idea, together with the aforementioned contrasts of Purim to Chanukah and Yom Kippur, we can see a broader picture of the holiday of Purim. Unlike Chanukah, when we specifically aim for a *public* show of faith in the form of lights outside or in our windows, and unlike Yom Kippur where we try to appear *outwardly* like angels, eschewing physical pleasures and engaging only in the spiritual, Purim is all about what happens on the *inside* — it is more than meets the eye.

The idea that Purim is opposite Yom Kippur [is that] on Yom Kippur there is no eating or drinking. Purim complements [Yom Kippur] in that there is a lot feasting, because there is no greater holiday for Israel than Yom Kippur … Both of them represent an acceptance of Torah. Yom Kippur as we find at the end of Tractate Ta’anit and Purim is it states, “They reaccepted the Torah in the time [of Achashverosh].” Therefore, [Purim] is opposite Yom Kippur.

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forever changed. Every week we invoke this verse in Havdalah as we leave Shabbat and we add “*kein thiye lanu*”; we pray that we too, even in the absence of Shabbat and the *neshama yiteira*, can see the spirituality, the *yad Hashem*, around us in the world, just as they did in that moment.

The obvious challenge is that if Purim is really about recommitting to Torah, then why does *limud ha'Torah* not play a prominent role in our celebration of Purim the way it does on Shavuot?

Endnotes

3. See *Olelot Ephraim* no. 144.
4. Literally “extra soul,” I like to think of the *neshama yiteirah* as our “ESP,” Extra Spiritual Perception, that allows us to feel closer to Hashem, to have a greater connection to the spiritual, on Shabbat.