

# Purim: It's More than Meets the Eye

**W**e 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 sukka, 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?

Many<sup>1</sup> 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



**Rabbi Allan Houben**

Upper School Judaic Studies Principal

Atlanta Jewish Academy

(eating, sharing, and providing for those less fortunate).

Others<sup>2</sup> 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.



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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:

ויתצבו בתחתית ההר, אמר רב אבדימי בר חמא בר חסא: מלמד שכפה הקדוש ברוך הוא עליהם את ההר כגיגית, ואמר להם: אם אתם מקבלים התורה - מוטב, ואם לאו - שם תהא קבורתכם. אמר רב אחא בר יעקב: מכאן מודעא רבה לאורייתא. אמר רבא: אף על פי כן, הדור קבלוה בימי אחשורוש. דכתיב קימו וקבלו היהודים, קיימו מה שקיבלו כבה.

*“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 Ya'akov said: From here is a substantial caveat to [the obligation to fulfill] the Torah. Rava said: Even so, they again accepted*

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*.<sup>3</sup> 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:

ליהודים 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:

”אורה זו תורה... שמחה זה יום טוב... ששון זו מילה... ויקר אלו תפילין...”  
“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?

## Purim and Yom Kippur

ענין פורים שהוא נגד יוה"כ ...  
ביוה"כ שאין בו אכילה ושתיה נגדו  
פורים ולכן בו הרבה משתה כי אין  
יו"ט לישראל כמו יוה"כ ... וכולן  
קבלת התורה יוה"כ כמ"ש בסוף  
תענית ופורים כמ"ש הדר קבלוה בימי  
ולכן הוא נגד יוה"כ.  
ליקוטי הגר"א קנה.

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.

*Likutei HaGra 154a*

forever changed. Every week we invoke this verse in Havdalah as we leave Shabbat and we add "*kein tihaye lanu*"; we pray that we too, even in the absence of Shabbat and the *neshama yiteira*,<sup>4</sup> 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 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 *am Yisrael* 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 festive eating and drinking of Purim is not simply a way of celebrating a physical salvation from annihilation. Our goal is to take what *appears* to be purely physical and elevate it to be *spiritual*. Much like making a bracha before eating elevates a physical, even animalistic act to a spiritual one, so too our celebration of Purim is intended to elevate ourselves to the spiritual through the physical. Just like Hashem used natural means to bring about the miracle of Purim while He remained hidden, so too the spiritual aspect of our commemoration remains hidden to the untrained, unobservant eye. In addition, we are not simply concerned with our own feast, we also elevate our physical celebration by looking out for those less fortunate, through *matanot la'evyonim*, and by sharing with our friends and neighbors, through *mishloach manot*.

The essence of Purim lies not in an

object or a particular mitzva per se, but behind the scenes in the work of engaging with and elevating the physical to the spiritual. The *avoda* of Purim, then, stands in stark contrast to the *avoda* of Yom Kippur, when we seek to reach the spiritual by avoiding the physical. Perhaps this is why the inherent comparison in the name of the holiday (*Yom ha'ki-Purim*) implies not just a similarity but a hierarchy. While we look at Yom Kippur as the holiest day of the year, the *avoda* of Yom Kippur can last but one day, as in reality we are part physical and we cannot indefinitely suspend our reliance on the physical. Purim, however, is in some ways greater than Yom Kippur, for the Purim model of *avodat Hashem* is one that is not limited to a single day of the year. If all we take away from Purim is a table full of *chametz* to eat in the remaining weeks before Pesach, then we have missed the message and opportunity that Purim provides. To fully capitalize on our Purim, we too need to recommit to the Torah by looking for the *Yad Hashem* in our everyday lives, and seeking opportunities to live with a Purim mentality. Our challenge is to take the *avoda* of Purim with us the rest of the year, and to make engaging with and elevating the physical to the spiritual a daily occurrence.

### Endnotes

- 1 See *Levush, Orach Chaim* no. 670.
- 2 *Shnei Luchot HaBrit, Tetzaveh* 27-28.
- 3 See *Olelot Ephraim* no. 144.
- 4 Literally "extra soul," I like to think of the *neshama yeteirah* as our "ESP," Extra Spiritual Perception, that allows us to feel closer to Hashem, to have a greater connection to the spiritual, on Shabbat.