

Purim: Finding Meaning and Passion in Our Mitzvos

When we reflect on the story of Megillas Esther, we tend to think about great courage, heroic sacrifices and hidden miracles. However, what can easily get overlooked due to the happy ending, is that the Jewish People of Shushan (and throughout the kingdom of Achashveirosh) faced a real and serious danger. In fact, the Midrash (*Esther Rabba* 7:14) explains that Haman's decree of destruction described in the Megillah was actually written in the Heavens and accepted by Hakadosh Baruch Hu Himself. What was the generation guilty of in the Heavenly Court that this decree was seemingly justified?

About 1,800 years ago, the students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked their Rebbe this very same question (*Megilla* 12a). As the expert teacher that he was, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai challenged his students to offer their own thoughts before sharing his answer. The students felt that the decree was because the Jews of Shushan attended and enjoyed the feast of Achashveirosh, while Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai explained that it was a result of worshipping an idol.¹

However, according to the Midrash, there seems to be something else that contributed to the dire situation; something that was missing from the life of the Jewish People and something that we can think about as well as we celebrate Purim.



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In Chapter 4 of Megillas Esther, after the letters proclaiming the upcoming destruction of the Jewish People were sent out, the entire Jewish nation began to mourn. Mordechai, the leader of the Jewish People, even arrived to work at the gates of the palace in sackcloth and ashes. When Queen Esther heard that Mordechai showed up dressed this way, she sent her messenger with a change of clothing, because she felt it was not appropriate to be in the palace dressed in sackcloth. Mordechai refused to change and Esther asked what was going on (*al zeh v'al mazeh* — 4:6).



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The Midrash (*Esther Rabba* 8:4) explains that Esther was not simply asking why Mordechai insisted on remaining in his mourner's clothing. Rather, like the students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, she noted that

the Jewish People had not been threatened with this level of danger in a very long time. What are they guilty of? Are they guilty of not beautifying the mitzvos or are they guilty of not observing the Ten Commandments?

In other words, what horrible sins did *Klal Yisrael* commit to be guilty of such a terrible decree? If I were Esther, I would have suggested something extreme — like her second suggestion: Are they no longer keeping the Ten Commandments? If that is the case, then we could at least understand the harsh response and the grave danger. However, the Midrash writes that Esther had another suggestion: Maybe the Jewish People are not fulfilling *hiddur mitzvah* and not beautifying the mitzvos.

Did Queen Esther suggest that because the Jews of Shushan were not buying the nicest esrogim on Sukkos or using the nicest shofar on Rosh Hashana they deserved a decree of destruction? Why would that contribute to such a harsh decree against the Jewish People? We can begin to answer with a Gemara (*Megilla* 13b), which seems equally as puzzling. When Haman unveiled

his plan to Achashveirosh to wipe out the Jewish People, Achashveirosh was nervous that Hashem would punish him as He did to Pharaoh in Egypt. Haman told Achashveirosh that he had nothing to be worried about because the Jewish People were sleeping through their fulfillment of the mitzvos (see Maharsha there).

Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Sofer (1815-1871), in his *Ksav Sofer*, explained that Haman did not claim that the Jewish People were not keeping the mitzvos — because they were. If they were not observing the mitzvos, then Achashveirosh would have had nothing to worry about. Rather, they were executing the mitzvos, but there was something missing in the performance — they were sleepwalking through the mitzvos.

When a person performs an action while sleepwalking, the action might look correct. However, there is something missing — it is devoid of any meaning. It is empty, thoughtless and absent-minded.

Mitzvos are not meant to be dry and robotic actions — they are supposed to be alive and exciting. The mitzvos are full of value, depth and holiness. They are opportunities to connect with Hashem and develop a meaningful relationship with Him by feeling His presence in our lives. However, in order to accomplish this, we must be mindful and conscious in our deeds.

The Jewish People in the Purim story were going through the motions of the mitzvos and it looked, on the surface, like everything was alright. But the actions were being done by rote

and without passion. There was no enthusiasm or excitement. No feelings or emotions. Their heart was not in it.

This explains why the Midrash (*Esther Rabba* 9:4) describes that the turning point of the Megilla in the Heavenly Court was when Hashem heard the passion-filled cries and prayers of the Jewish children in Shushan after Haman said that he would murder them the next day. Those heartfelt tefillos had the same effect as a shofar on Rosh Hashana and caused Hashem to move from His seat of judgment to His seat of mercy. Because of this, Hashem ripped up the decree of genocide and replaced it with salvation and protection.

Maybe this is what Queen Esther meant when she suggested to Mordechai that the Jewish People were guilty of this terrible decree because they did not beautify the mitzvos. We beautify that which is important to us and that which we are passionate and enthusiastic about. If our home is important to us, we beautify our homes. If our phone is important, we upgrade to the newest and fastest phone. If our clothing is important, we keep up with the latest styles and fashions.

If our mitzvos are important to us, then we try to make them beautiful — both the objects that we use to do the mitzva as well as the way that we perform them. *Hiddur mitzva* is not just a nice thing to do — it represents how much of a priority the mitzva is. If the mitzva is something that we care about and cherish as an opportunity to fulfill the will of Hashem and connect to Him in a meaningful way, then we do not perform the mitzva on

its most basic level. Rather, we want it to be beautiful, which expresses our appreciation of the mitzva and our love of Hashem.²

Of all the Jewish holidays on our calendar, Purim is one of the most joyous and celebrated. The festive meals, the costumes, the singing and dancing and the friendly exchange of *mishloach manos* all contribute to the jubilant atmosphere of the day. We certainly do not sleepwalk through the mitzvos of Purim. Rather, we perform them with excitement, fervor and delight as we recognize the value of these cherished and passion-filled moments of spirituality and meaning. Purim is a day to inject additional feeling and focus into our mitzvos and open our hearts to grow in our relationship with Hashem.

Of course, the celebration of the day is also an opportunity to communicate to our children the value and priority of the Torah and mitzvos in our lives by exhibiting the enthusiasm, joy and meaning that we have in our performance of them. There is no better way to educate our children than by showing them through our own actions, and being their greatest role models.

Wishing you and your families a meaningful and joyous Purim.

Endnotes

1 See Rashi here and Tosfos, *Kesubos* 33b, for further discussion regarding this issue.

2 This can also explain why the Gemara (*Shabbos* 88a) writes that the Jewish People received the Torah again on Purim, but this time around it was done voluntarily and willingly.