

Loshon Hara You've Got to Hear

The Gemara elaborates on a fateful conversation between Haman and Achashveirosh, in which Haman convinces him to approve his plans to, Heaven forbid, decimate the Jewish People:

אמר רבא ליכא דידע לישנא בישא כהמן אמר ליה תא ניכלינהו אמר ליה מסתפינא מאלקיו דלא ליעביד בי כדעבד בקמאי אמר ליה ישנו מן המצות אמר ליה אית בהו רבנן אמר ליה עם אחד הן.

Rava said: Haman was a most skillful slanderer. Haman said, "Let's destroy them." Achashveirosh said, I am concerned because "Things did not end well for the enemies of Hashem's People in the past." Haman reassured him: "The Jews have been sleeping (yashnu) in respect to their mitzva observance." Achashveirosh said: "But aren't there Sages?!" Haman retorted "Am Echod; they are One People."

Megillah 13b

The *S'fas Emes* ad loc. explains that Haman was indeed correct and accurately understood the essence of the Jewish people. We are collectively responsible for each other. A Jewish people with rabbis observing Torah while the rest of the nation is disengaged is a Jewish people deserving, G-d forbid, of demise.

It is important to note that this was a truly remarkable generation. In addition to Mordechai and Esther, this generation included tzadikim the likes of Daniel, Ezra, Nechemia and Malachi! These are individuals who have entire books of Tanach honoring their accomplishments — singularly righteous individuals after



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whom we've named our children for millennia. Yet, because there were components of our nation who were disengaged, Hashem deemed us, *chas v'shalom*, worthy of annihilation.

On a deeper level, the Vilna Gaon (to Esther 1:1, *Remez*) famously tells us that Megillat Esther represents our nation's relationship with Hashem and our struggle with the Evil Inclination. Every place it says the word "*HaMelech*" it refers the Almighty, while the word "*Achashveirosh*" refers to the *Yeitzer Horah*.



With this understanding, the acceptance of Haman's accusation symbolizes something truly colossal; G-d Himself, so to speak, agreed with this piercing criticism of our people. The true mechanics of what could grant the Hamans of history the traction to implement a plan to destroy G-d's People is an accusation

of this nature: "The scholars are thriving, but the laymen are spiritually stagnant."

Whether you are a scholar or a layman, this is a rather staggering prognosis of our situation in Exile and our hopes for redemption. But why is partial disengagement so devastating? Why isn't the presence of thriving sages at least a tolerable state for the Jewish people?

On a practical level, Hashem dispatched every Jewish soul with a unique and vital contribution to the ultimate goal of expressing Hashem's kingdom on earth. Bereft of the collective contributions of most Jews, we have failed to make this world a G-dly place. We are a dull "Light onto the People" and have ultimately failed our purpose.

Perhaps we could share a similar insight to develop the idea. Arguably, the most popular d'var Torah on Sukkot is a midrash, *Vayikra Rabbah* 30:12, that analyzes the four species and the four general categories of Jews they symbolize. From those possessing both Torah and mitzvos — the etrog, down to those possessing neither — the aravot, we grasp all four categories. The message of the midrash is that, through the mitzvah of the four species, Hashem is

conveying to us His desired social and spiritual state of our nation; an *aguda*, a unified team, comprised of these four indispensable elements.

This is one of those feel-good *divrei Torah* that is welcome at any table, but when taken seriously, this is a daunting expectation. Am I looking for a school specifically with an element of “aravot”? Do I wish they were in my shul? Can I honestly say I celebrate and embrace the presence of those who struggle with Torah and mitzvot the same way I embrace the devout in my community? These are powerful questions.

Truth be told, we do daven to be distanced from bad friends and bad neighbors every day. A careful look at the message of the four species, however, will reconcile this apparent contradiction. With whatever shortcomings these “species” possess, they are showing up to be part of the bundle we call *klal Yisroel*. Perhaps they are aravot but they are interested in unifying with the *etrogim* among us. The bundling of the four species helps us internalize the goal of unifying the various elements of our Nation. These are the members of our people who, regardless of the caliber of our holy scholars, play an indispensable role in our survival, success and ultimate Redemption.

Engaging Our Am Echod

Personally, as both a parent and an educator, this focuses a more accurate lens on concepts like “differentiation”

and “multiple intelligences.” It is an immense mistake to approach these as “Chumash class” concerns. We have a responsibility to find ways to engage and educate the gamut of *neshamot* in our institutions. This concern is not simply one of academic achievement. Effectively engaging children in Torah and mitzvot enables them to discover the unique role and contribution they were destined to make toward our mission.

There is no shortage of committed and creative parents and educators thinking of ways to introduce more portals of entry into *avodat Hashem*. Here are two suggestions worth considering:

1. Jewish Living Workshops, a program we created at Columbus Torah Academy, invites professionals serving the Jewish community to present workshops explaining what they do. These workshops expose young minds to jobs in kashrut, Hatzalah, eruv, sofrut, Misaskim, etc., and introduce them to the variety of ways they can contribute to the Jewish people. When a teacher is out for the day, why not use the opportunity to show budding adults the many needs and opportunities in your community that they won’t experience in a K-12 education?

2. Navi, more so than any other topic in Torah, allows us to viscerally experience the strengths and shortcomings of dynamic individuals struggling with the gamut of life’s challenges. There are different

approaches to teaching Navi. I passionately believe that helping young minds live the stories, and find creative means to personally express the life lessons inherent in them, is vital to developing a deep, personal and comprehensive connection to *avodat Hashem*. For example, David Hamelech encounters so many crises and hardships and consistently turns these into new ways to connect more deeply to Hashem. Why not have students reflect on a challenge they have encountered and how it can serve as a means to forge a deeper connection — or even write their own “Tehillim” about it? Simplifying Navi to a list of keywords and fill-in-the-blanks will not facilitate these results.

Arur Haman?

Purim, in its fullest, is designed to bring us to the level of seeing no difference between “*baruch Mordechai*” and “*arur Haman*” (*Megillah* 7b). Perhaps this is one of the hidden, (un)intended blessings of Haman’s rhetoric: underneath Haman’s apparent condemnation is a beautiful message. The Jewish People absolutely need every single one of us. Excelling in Torah is fantastic but there is a diverse and indispensable world of needs and roles for every member of the Jewish people beyond the *beit medrash*. Our existence literally depends on these individuals finding their place in the broader world of Torah, mitzvot and Judaism. Engaging our diverse spectrum of *neshamot* is a vital key to Redemption.