

Purim in the Time of Cholera

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Shabbat Zachor 2020

We've all been preoccupied with coronavirus in these past weeks. From a Torah perspective, what is it that we might be able to take away from the experience of dealing with an epidemic?

On the Jewish calendar, Purim and Pesach are always linked. Even in a leap year, Purim always falls out in the second Adar so that it will never be more than 30 days away from Pesach. But the connection goes much deeper. Purim itself is actually modelled on the holiday of Pesach.

It's not an accident that the key number on Pesach is four:

- Four cups
- Four questions
- Four sons
- Four languages of redemption

On Purim we have exactly four *mitzvot*: The *seudah*, the Megillah, *mishloach manot*, and *matanot l'evyonim*. And each of them has a resonance with Pesach.

The *seudah* corresponds to the *seder*. In each case wine plays a uniquely central role. We don't just recite *kiddush*: Both on Purim and Pesach there's a special emphasis on יין.

Of course every holiday has its own text. But only Purim and Pesach revolve around special texts that tell their respective stories: The Haggadah on Pesach and the Megillah on Purim.

On Purim we have the *mitzvot* of *matanot l'evyonim* and *mishloach manot*. We give gifts to the poor and to our friends. There is an emphasis on making sure that everyone has the opportunity to celebrate.

And so it is on Pesach. The laws of the *seder* begin with the notion that we have to be sure everyone has the capacity to have a *seder*, including the poor. It's actually baked into the original *mitzvah* of *korban pesach* itself. *שה לבית אבות שה לבית*. No one could possibly consume an entire lamb on their own; so the Torah insisted that the Israelites invite guests to their meals. Those with a little more are constantly on the lookout for those with a little less. This is why we begin the *seder* by saying *כל דכפין ייתי וייכל* – whoever is hungry, let them come and eat. It's the whole theme of the day.

Thinking about Purim in this framework helps explain something else, too. Why are there two separate holidays: Purim on the 14th of Adar and Shushan Purim on the 15th? Holidays on the Jewish calendar have one date. Why, on Purim, are there two?

The one exception to the general rule is Pesach. If one missed it – at least in Temple times – one could observe the holiday on Pesach Sheni. And that was basically the origin of Shushan Purim.

For various reasons the Jews of Shushan were not able to celebrate the holiday on the 14th, so the 15th functioned as their make-up date.

All of these connections notwithstanding, the question remains: Why would Purim have been modelled after Pesach?

On one level, the answer is very simple. Pesach celebrates the salvation of the Jewish people from certain destruction at the hands of a genocidal enemy. And so does Purim. But there may have been an even more compelling reason.

The story of the Megillah turns on Esther's decision, in spite of her misgivings, to bring her case to the king. But before she does, she insists that Mordechai arrange a public fast.

לְךָ כְּנוּס אֶת-כָּל-הַיְהוּדִים הַנִּמְצָאִים בְּשׁוּשָׁן, וְצוּמוּ עָלַי וְעַל-תְּאֲכִלוּ וְעַל-תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה הַזֶּה--גַּם-אֲנִי וְנַעֲרָתִי, אֲצוּמִים כֵּן

Go, gather together all the Jews in Shushan, and fast on my behalf. Neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my companions will do the same.

So just when did this happen? When were all of these Jews fasting for three days? The Megillah itself tells us that the die was cast on the 13th of Nissan. Following the logic of the text, the Midrash picks up the thread and says Mordechai went to Esther that very day.

In the Midrashic imagination, there was a conversation about the timing. When Esther suggests the fast, Mordechai looks at the calendar and objects. "But the third day of this fast is Pesach!"

To which Esther replies:

וְאִם אֵין יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת הַפֶּסַח לְמִי הוּא פֶסַח

If are there are no Jews left to observe it, what use is there for Pesach?!

And this reading has the advantage of making sense of the Megillah's succeeding line.

וַיַּעֲבֹר, מְרֹדֶכַי; וַיַּעַשׂ, כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר-צִוְתָהּ עָלָיו אֶסְתֵּר

What do the first two words mean? *Mordechai transgressed*. He followed Esther's words and compelled the Jews of Shushan to fast on Pesach rather than observe the holiday by eating *matzah* and *maror* and drinking wine. Of course it was justified, but it meant sacrificing the Yom Tov for the sake of a greater good.

So now we have our answer. Why was Purim modelled after Pesach?

Because Purim was compensatory. In a year when the Jewish people living in Shushan missed Pesach, here was a way to make it up. Of course we know that the story of Purim is about fate turning on a dime: despair turning into hope and certain death giving way to new life.

But what I'm arguing is that the holiday itself is a testament to our capacity to transform crisis into opportunity. Where the observance of one holiday wasn't possible, we functionally created another.

Rabbi Moshe Isserles, the Rema, was one of the most important Ashkenazic *poskim* in Jewish history. Against the backdrop of the *Shulhan Arukh*, R. Yosef Karo's Sephardic-oriented codification of Jewish law, the Rema wrote the glosses that accounted for Ashkenazic practice. Our community has been turning to his words ever since – for the better part of the last 500 years.

In addition to being a halakhic authority, the Rema was also a great Kabbalist. And in 1556, he wrote a mystical commentary on the Megillah called *מחיר יין*. In his introduction to the book, he explains why he wrote it. In that year, a cholera epidemic broke out in the city of Krakow and the Rema was forced to flee. He ended up in a tiny Polish village called Szydłów. There was nothing there. It was desolate and deserted. He could scarcely find food or water.

It was Purim, he said,

ולא יכלנו לקיים ימי פורי במשתה ושמחה

but there was no joy in Szydłów.

But *פקודי ה' ישרים משמחי לב* – the words of Torah are a source of joy. And so the Rema decided to write a book. At a time when it was impossible to celebrate Purim as one would have hoped, here was his best attempt at making lemonade out of lemons. (I'm not sure whether he meant it literally or not, but at the end of the book, he writes that he sent the text to his father on Purim as *mishloach manot*.)

Thankfully, most of us won't have to miss Purim this year. But plenty of people will. The question is: Like the Jews of Shushan and like the Rema: How do we transform crisis into opportunity?

So allow me to conclude with three suggestions.

First, moments like these give us an opportunity to reflect on the fragility of life. When tomorrow is uncertain, it means today every moment is urgent. We don't have to wait to tell the people in our lives how much they mean to us. We don't have to wait to make that commitment we've been dithering about. There's no reason we can't do it today.

Second, as my late uncle Rabbi Levi Meier used to say, we have an opportunity to transform isolation into solitude. It's actually quite amazing to step back and notice – without judgment – the degree to which coronavirus has not only dominated our discourse, but consumed it. It's the only thing we can talk about. In this age of distraction when it's hard to focus on any one thing for more than eight seconds or 140 characters, we're transfixed.

- We're all experts
- We've done the research
- We've read the guidelines
- We know all the statistics
- We're tracking the victims

What a great reminder that when something is important enough to us, we can find all the time and energy in the world to focus on it. Imagine if we applied the same sustained attention to something that will be here long after the coronavirus is gone. Imagine if we could channel that energy into a project at our shul or a school or any other wonderful organization. The benefits would be without end.

And finally, we have before us an opportunity to reflect on the importance of community. One of the great challenges – or maybe even one of the great ironies – of this virus, is that at times like these, consciously or otherwise, we crave community.

We want to be together with people who share the challenge

- To empathize
- To commiserate
- To support one another

But the guidelines for how to deal with this epidemic indicate just the opposite. If you think you've been exposed, you go into quarantine. If you think might be at risk, you stay home. And so the people most in need of the community's warm embrace, have to live without it.

So maybe it's no coincidence that Purim comes at just such a time. It's the one holiday when we bring the mountain to Mohammed. We deliver *mishloach manot* and we read the Megillah for people in their homes. If they're not coming to us, we turn around and go to them. In this time of crisis, the most important thing we can give our friends is the reassurance that they are not alone.

We'll continue to daven every day for those who have been affected. And we'll continue to daven that this epidemic disappears with the same swiftness with which it appeared. But until that day comes, it's up to us to make sure those suffering the absence of community at least know that we're there for them.

וְהַחֲדִישׁ אֱשֶׁר נִהַפְּדָה לָהֶם מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה, וּמֵאֲבֵל לְיוֹם טוֹב

May these days of uncertainty and tribulation quickly become days of relief and rejoicing.

