



THE DUAL NATURE OF THE PURIM MIRACLE

The old joke about Jewish holiday celebrations is, “they tried to kill us, we survived, let’s eat.” Purim, at first glance, fits neatly into this framework. From a young age, we are taught about Haman, the villain of the Megillah, and his evil plot against the Jewish nation. We learn to admire the heroic efforts of Esther and Mordechai in foiling Haman’s evil plan. Although the miraculous sequence of events is clearly attributed to Hashem, the miracle is considered a *nes nistar* (hidden miracle), and Hashem’s name, despite the fact that He is the orchestrator of events, does not appear throughout the Megillah. The Purim story described in the Megillah is multifaceted and holds many layers of meaning. Let us examine the interplay between the role of the Divine and human interventions in



the Purim story and the nature of the miracles involved.

Rav Mordechai Breuer, in *Pirkei Moadot*, writes of the dual nature of the miracles of the Megillah and how they are reflected in the bracha we recite at its conclusion. The Gemara, *Megillah* 21b teaches:

לאחריה מאי מברך ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו

מלך העולם (האל) הרב את ריבנו והדן את דיננו והנוקם את נקמתנו והנפרע לנו מצרינו והמשלם גמול לכל אויבי נפשנו ברוך אתה ה' הנפרע לישראל מכל צריהם רבא אמר האל המושיע אמר רב פפא הלכך נימרינהו לתרוייהו ברוך אתה ה' הנפרע לישראל מכל צריהם האל המושיע.

What blessing is recited after the reading of the Megillah in places where it is customary to recite such a blessing? The following blessing is recited: “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, the God Who pleads our cause, and Who judges our claim, and Who avenges our vengeance, and Who punishes our foes, and Who brings retribution to our enemies. Blessed are You, Lord, Who, on behalf of Israel, exacts punishment from all of their foes.” Rava said: The conclusion of the blessing is as follows: “Blessed are you, Lord, the God who brings salvation.” Rav Pappa said:

Therefore, since there are two opinions on the matter, we should say both of them: "Blessed are you, Lord, Who, on behalf of Israel, exacts punishment from all their foes; the God Who brings salvation."

Both proposals are accepted by Rav Pappa and merged into the one bracha that we are familiar with. Rav Breuer explains that this *machloket* among the Amoraim is related to properly classifying the miracle of Purim. Is the focus on the salvation of the Jewish nation itself or is the focus on the fact that the Jewish nation was able to avenge their enemies? The solution suggested by Rav Pappa incorporates both these elements into the concluding bracha, indicating that there were two distinct causes for celebration by the nation at that time. This message is expressed in the Megillah (9:1):

אֲשֶׁר שָׁבְרוּ אֹיְבֵי הַיְהוּדִים לְשִׁלוֹט בָּהֶם וְנִהְפְּוּ
הוּא אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁלֹטוּ הַיְהוּדִים הַמָּחָה בְּשִׁנְאֵיהֶם:
The very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to dominate them, the opposite happened, and the Jews dominated their enemies.

Two parallel salvations develop in the storyline of the Megillah, creating two distinct trajectories. The events leading to the selection of Esther as Achashverosh's replacement of Vashti forms one storyline, and the traitorous plot of Bigtan and Teresh, exposed by Mordechai and recorded in the king's chronicle, forms the second storyline. Both storylines describe events that transpire before Haman arrives on the scene to take steps to annihilate the Jewish nation, illustrating the concept referenced in Megillah 13b that Hashem provides the *refuah* before the *makkah*:

אחר הדברים האלה (אחר מאי) אמר רבא
אחר שברא הקב"ה רפואה למכה דאמר ר"ל
אין הקב"ה מכה את ישראל אלא כבורא להם

רפואה תחילה.

"After these events did King Ahasuerus promote Haman" (Esther 3:1). After what particular events? Rava said: Only after the Holy One, Blessed be He, created a remedy for the blow and set in place the chain of events that would lead to the miraculous salvation was Haman appointed, setting the stage for the decree against the Jews to be issued. Rava explains: As Reish Lakish said: The Holy One, Blessed be He, does not strike at the Jewish people unless He has already created a remedy for them beforehand.

Were both of these "refuot" really necessary for the miracle of Purim? We could argue that Esther's position as queen was all that was needed to eliminate the threat and reverse the future decree against her nation. The honor given by the king to Mordechai in perek 6, as repayment for the earlier story of saving his life, does not appear to be a necessary step in the overall salvation and reversal of the threat to the Jewish nation. If so, what is its purpose? The answer is that Mordechai's honor satisfies the other side of the coin on the dual nature of the Purim miracle reflected in the bracha of *harav et riveinu* mentioned above. While Esther uses her position of power to petition Achashverosh to reverse Haman's decree throughout the kingdom, she does not cause Haman's actual death. It is the honor given to Mordechai that creates the downward spiral for Haman, which leads to his death on his own tree and to the salvation of the Jews of Shushan. Haman's individual death lays the groundwork for his decree to also be terminated. The termination of the decree is far more consequential than Haman's death. Nevertheless, the Megillah focuses on both the termination of

the decree and the death of Haman. As such, we acknowledge the smaller scale salvation in Shushan created by Haman's death, as well as the larger scale victory of the Jews against their enemies in the kingdom at large with the reversal of Haman's decree.

These two separate elements of Hashem's salvation in the Megillah are represented by the horse and signet ring, which were both bestowed upon Mordechai. Despite Haman's contempt of Mordechai, Haman is commanded by the king to honor him by leading him publicly on the king's horse around the city. This suggestion was proposed to Achashverosh by Haman himself, when he mistakenly assumed the honor was meant for him. This event, in turn, leads to Haman's public humiliation and the building of the gallows to hang Mordechai. Ultimately, Haman is hung on the gallows he himself had willed into existence. Interwoven within this story is the tale of Esther's accusations against Haman at her second party. When Haman is deposed, it is Mordechai who is offered his position. It is because of Mordechai's relationship to Esther that he is able to influence kingdom policies, and he is handed the king's signet ring that had been relegated previously to Haman. This change in authority, brought about by the individual demise of Haman himself, allows for the advancement of new legislation to counteract the decrees previously sent out by Haman against the Jews, thereby granting the Jews permission to avenge their enemies.

The focus on individuals enhances the miracles. Haman's issue with Mordechai should have remained a personal issue. However, Haman exaggerates the dishonor and targets

not only Mordechai but his entire nation. Despite this larger focus, Haman also goes to great lengths to punish Mordechai individually, and this hatred consumes him more than the plans for the nation Mordechai represents. This is verbalized in Haman's exchange with Zeresh and his loved ones in 5:11-13:

וַיִּסְפֹּר לָהֶם הַמֶּן אֶת כְּבוֹד עֲשָׂרוֹ וְרַב בָּנָיו
וְאֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר גָּדְלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאוֹ
עַל הַשָּׂרִים וְעַבְדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ. וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּן אִי אֶל
הַבִּיָּאָה אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה עִם הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶל הַמִּשְׁתָּה
אֲשֶׁר עֲשִׂתָּה כִּי אִם אוֹתִי וְגַם לְמַחֵר אֲנִי קְרוּאָה
לָהּ עִם הַמֶּלֶךְ. וְכָל זֶה אֵינְנוּ שׁוֹהָ לִּי בְּכָל יַעַת
אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי רֹאֶה אֶת מְרֻדְכֵי הַיְהוּדִי יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר
הַמֶּלֶךְ.

And Haman told them about his great wealth and his many sons, and all about how the king had promoted him and advanced him above the officials and the king's courtiers. "What is more," said Haman, "Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am invited by her along with the king. Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate."

In contrast, Esther accuses Haman as an individual who is a threat to her people, but her focus remains on saving the Jewish nation. She only singles out Haman after an extensive introduction about the distress of her nation. When she speaks to Achashverosh at her second party, she says (7:3-4):

וַתַּעַן אֶסְתֵּר הַמַּלְכָּה וַתֹּאמֶר אִם מִצָּאתִי חַן
בְּעֵינֶיךָ הַמֶּלֶךְ וְאִם עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב תִּנְתֶּן לִּי נַפְשִׁי
בְּשִׂאלָתִי וְעַמִּי בְּבִקְשָׁתִי כִּי נִמְכַרְנוּ אֲנִי וְעַמִּי
לְהַשְׁמִיד לְהַרְגוֹ וּלְאַבֵּד וְאֵלּוּ לְעַבְדִּים וְלִשְׁפָחוֹת
נִמְכַרְנוּ הַחֲרָשְׁתִּי כִּי אֵין הִצֵּר שׁוֹהָ בְּגִזְק הַמֶּלֶךְ.
Queen Esther replies: "If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases

Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble."

Looking back at the joke we started with in this article, we can ask whether it is true that on Purim they first tried to kill us and then we survived? From the outset, Hashem was orchestrating a salvation, using the personal decisions made by individuals based on their own motivations, to conduct the story from behind the scenes. We could say that the model employed here is that the measures to survive and be saved came before the "tried to kill us" stage. The Purim miracle is put into effect before any challenges manifested. Haman's efforts against the Jews were for naught because Esther was already a prominent figure in the palace from perek 2. Mordechai's heroic act is recorded in the king's chronicle even before Haman rose to power in perek 3, and before he targeted Mordechai. This prevents Haman from claiming more honor for himself than Mordechai. When it was most needed, Hashem ensures that Achashverosh has a sleepless night and reads the account of Bigtan and Teresh's assassination attempt. The framework for *geulah* is built in proactively from the beginning.

There is one exception to this principle. When Mordechai instructs Esther to go to the king on behalf of the Jewish nation, she hesitates because she had not been called upon

by the king for 30 days, a distinct unit of time. She senses a distancing from Achashverosh and is worried that at this time he may not look upon her favorably if she were to approach him. This situation causes Esther's hesitation and had the potential to undermine all the steps Hashem had prepared behind the scenes. At that moment, Hashem created a predicament that challenged Esther. The large-scale *geulah* about to be rolled out to the Jewish nation is predicated on a moral decision that she has to make. Esther's desire to live is pitted against a moral obligation to save her nation. Because Hashem endows humans with *bechira chafshit*, Esther is the only one able to effectuate the *geulah*, despite all the preparatory steps Hashem had taken. This powerful message — of humans ultimately being the deciders of their own salvation — is seen in a poignant fashion at this climax in the story described in the Megillah. The personal sacrifice that Esther is required to make is significant, and brings about the salvation we celebrate.

Although Hashem is the mastermind behind the Megillah, His name is not mentioned explicitly. Perhaps one reason for this absence is to reinforce the message about the power of bringing the *geulah*. The demands of self-sacrifice and the initiative required of us, notwithstanding the behind-the-scenes support from Hashem, are daunting. Yet it is incumbent upon us to recognize the key role we play in jump-starting our own salvation, and how rewarding it can be when we rise to the challenge.