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March 2023 • Purim 5783

Dedicated in memory of our beloved

Mr. Willy Apfel a”h

לעילוי נשמת רב זאב בן עזריאל

Sheila and Ronny Apfel and family



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A PURIM FILLED WITH LIFE, LOSS AND LOVE

My Dear Friends,

This will be a difficult Purim for me. I am still within the year of mourning for my father and stepping into Purim with all of its associations of joy and happiness feels discordant. It is uncomfortable for me to think about celebrating Purim in such an emotional state of loss. What is Purim supposed to mean for someone experiencing sadness?

This very personal question has compelled me to revisit the sources and re-think my understanding of Purim. In our tradition, Purim is, of course, identified with joy, but it is unlike that of other chagim. One

example is the way in which the holidays interrupt and cancel shiva for a mourner, as opposed to Purim in which shiva still persists. Why this difference?

For me, this distinction points to the very character of the day. The Jewish holidays, in general, are designed to remove us from the banal and pedestrian structure of day-to-day life. Everything stops. We don't work. Our tefilot are different and we are together with family and friends.

Purim, however, is different. Rather than removing us from the world, Purim is a time when we see the world as it truly is — with all of its

jagged edges and contradictions. It's a world in which heroes and villains, like Mordechai and Haman, are confused. A world in which even after the redemption we remain citizens of Shushan and "servants of Achashverosh." We do not say Hallel on Purim, the Talmud explains, because we still live in the world of Purim.

In this sense, Purim helps us experience joy even in a world of unredeemed imperfection. In his writings on Purim (Purim #30), Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner asks us to imagine a sick person battling an illness who eventually finds a cure. After recovery,

that individual makes a *seudat hoda'ah*, a special meal to show appreciation to Hashem for overcoming this difficult challenge. Then Rabbi Hutner asks us to imagine someone whose sickness is that he is emotionally hindered from experiencing joy. This individual also makes a *seudat hoda'ah* upon recovery. But the happiness at such a celebration is different — it is the celebration of the capacity to rejoice.

Purim, he writes, is a celebration of our capacity to rejoice even in a broken world. We do not pretend that all is perfect. We recognize and admit our mortality and limitations. We give *mishloach manot* and *matanot le'veyonim* which reflect the gifts of

our family and friends, the blessings of helping others in need and the support we experience in community. Like with the story of Purim, Hashem is our true support and is at times not overtly revealed. We need to seek God to experience God. And we read the Megillah during the day which reminds us that, like Mordechai and Esther, we, too, can make a difference in the grand story of our people, bringing redemption to the Jewish nation and spreading goodness throughout society. While it's not our personal responsibility to perfect the world, we can move it one step closer. We do make a difference, in the eyes of our loving God and the lives of

those around us.

It might not all be okay. Not every story seems to have a happily-ever-after. But we have the capacity to rejoice.

The other holidays segment a section of time and take us out of our lives so that the mourning of shiva is cancelled as it is naturally incongruent. But Purim is not a step away from real life, it is real life. And in life we can laugh amidst the tears, and we can smile even when there is a deep void and we can share a toast with our friends to the memory of the ones who we will always carry with us in our hearts.

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TRUTH

We believe in truth, and humanity's ability to discover it.

The pursuit of truth has always been the driving force behind advances in human understanding, from Socrates' wanderings through the streets of Athens to the innovations of the Industrial Revolution. People of faith, who believe in a divine author of Creation, believe that the act of discovery is sacred, whether in the realm of philosophy, physics, economics or the study of the human mind.

The Jewish people in particular affirm that beginning with the Revelation of the Torah at Mount Sinai, God entrusted eternal teachings and values to us that we must cherish and study diligently above all else, for they represent the terms of the special covenant that God made with us. All people, regardless of their faith background, should value the accumulation of knowledge because it is the way to truth and a prerequisite to human growth.

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חיים
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We believe in bringing values to life.

Jewish thought asserts that truth is made available to human beings not simply so they can marvel at it but also so that they can use it. Students studying literature, computer science, law, psychology or anything else are expected to take what they learn and implement it within their own lives as well as apply it to the real world around them.

When people see a problem that needs addressing, their responsibility is to draw upon the truths they uncovered during their studies in finding a solution. They must live truth in the real world, not simply study it in the classroom.

TORAT ADAM

אדם
INFINITE HUMAN WORTH

We believe in the infinite worth of each and every human being.

Judaic tradition first introduced to the world the radical proposition that each individual is created in the divine image and accordingly possesses incalculable worth and value.

The unique talents and skills each individual possesses are a reflection of this divine image, and it is therefore a sacred task to hone and develop them. The vast expansive human diversity that results from this process is not a challenge but a blessing. Each of us has our own path to greatness.

TORAT CHESED

חסד
COMPASSION

We believe in the responsibility to reach out to others in compassion.

Even as we recognize the opportunities of human diversity, Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of common obligations. In particular, every human being is given the same responsibility to use his or her unique gifts in the service of others; to care for their fellow human beings; to reach out to them in thoughtfulness, kindness and sensitivity; and to form a connected community.

TORAT ZION

ציון
REDEMPTION

We believe that humanity's purpose is to transform our world for the better and move history forward.

In Jewish thought, the concept of redemption represents the conviction that while we live in an imperfect world, we have a responsibility to strive toward its perfection. Regardless of a person's personal convictions about whether social perfection is attainable or even definable, it is the act of working toward it that gives our lives meaning and purpose. This common striving is an endeavor that brings all of humanity together.

The Jewish people's task to build up the land of Israel into an inspiring model society represents this effort in microcosm. But it is part of a larger project that includes all of humankind. If the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice, then redemption represents our responsibility to work together in the service of God to move history forward.



Find more shiurim and articles from Rabbi Dr. Berman at <https://www.yutorah.org/rabbi-dr-ari-berman/>



Table Talk: Quotes and Questions for Family Discussions

Prepared by Shoshana Rockoff (GPATS) and
Netanel Muskat (RIETS)

Please enjoy this collection of sources, quotes, and discussion questions to enhance your Purim experience.

Humor and Joy as an Antidote to Fear and Hate

Imagine what it is to be part of a people that had once heard the command issued against them: “to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews — young and old, women and children — on a single day” (Esther 3:13) ... The very existence of Purim in our historical memory is traumatic. The Jewish response to trauma is counter-intuitive and extraordinary. You defeat fear by joy. You conquer terror by collective celebration. You prepare a festive meal, invite guests, give gifts to friends. While the story is being told, you make an unruly noise as if not only to blot out the memory of Amalek, but to make a joke out of the whole episode. You wear masks. You drink a little too much. You make a Purim spiel. Precisely because the threat was so serious, you refuse to be serious — and in that refusal you are doing something very serious indeed. You are denying your

enemies a victory. You are declaring that you will not be intimidated. As the date of the scheduled destruction approaches, you surround yourself with the single most effective antidote to fear: joy in life itself. As the three-sentence summary of Jewish history puts it: “They tried to destroy us. We survived. Let’s eat.” Humour is the Jewish way of defeating hate. What you can laugh at, you cannot be held captive by.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Purim Family Edition, rabbisacks.org, <https://www.rabbisacks.org/ceremony-celebration-family-edition/purim-family-edition/>

- **Reflect on a time that you have used humor to alleviate fear?**
- **Why do you think humor is the Jewish way of defeating hate?**

Re-acceptance of the Torah

The Rabbis record the tradition that although the Jewish people accepted the Torah at Mount Sinai out of their own free will, there was, nevertheless, an aspect of coercion involved. After the miracle of Purim, the people accepted the Torah again, this time without any element of coercion (*Shabbat* 88a) ... The custom of wearing masks and dressing up to conceal one’s true identity is meant to show that just as in the story of Purim, one had to look below the surface to see the hidden Mover behind the events, so too in Torah study, one must always look below the surface, and read in-between the lines to absorb the insights of the Oral Torah. The custom of masquerading is meant to teach us, *al tistakel*

bekankan elah bemah sheyesh bo, “Do not look at the outer appearance of the container, but rather at that which is hiding beneath the surface within it.” This is also why God’s name never appears in the megillah. The hidden Oral Torah interpretation always enlightens the Written Torah and puts things into clearer perspective.

R. Hershel Schachter, The Spirit of Purim, torahweb.org, https://torahweb.org/torah/2001/moadim/rsch_purim.html

- **How can Purim become a re-acceptance of the Torah for you?**
- **How can you look below the surface level to find the hidden meaning in events and relationships?**

Stepping into History

The Jews of Shushan didn't sit around waiting for a miracle. They gathered their forces, united in support of Esther, and when they did so, their fate took a turn. Mordechai and Esther are the heroes of the Megillah, not because they split the sea, made it rain or caused the sun to stand still in the heavens. They are the heroes of the Megillah because they stepped into history when their people needed them and put the needs of their nation before their own. It is precisely their lack of prophetic vision that makes them our heroes from the Megillah's perspective. They didn't act because God commanded them to, they acted because they

understood that when God's face is hidden, we don't have the luxury of remaining apathetic to the needs of our people. G-d's absence from the Megillah reminds us that when His face is hidden, our hopes for survival lie in our ability to set aside our differences and rally around our shared interests.

Yael Leibowitz, *Supernatural Elements*, mizrachi.org, March 2020, <http://mizrachi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/HaMizrachi-Purim-5780.pdf>

- **How can you step into history?**
- **What is one small thing you can do to contribute to the good of your nation?**

God's Hiddenness

[Lots] seem to symbolize everything traditional Judaism doesn't believe in. Why? Well, lots are chance. In casting lots to determine that day upon which the Jews would die, Haman was doing something rich with symbolic meaning: he was intentionally leaving the date of the Jews' demise up to chance. The Megillah even goes as far as to say that Haman cast lots not just to destroy us but also to terrify us (Esther 9:24); that is, the lots were instruments of psychological warfare. It was as if Haman was taunting the Jews with the thought that whether they would live or die was not up to a providential God, but up to blind fate. They were the prisoners of cold, hard chance. Such a vision is indeed terrifying. If Jews and Judaism have stood for something over the

years it is for the opposite vision. In our worldview the Almighty may prefer to stay hidden much of the time, but that doesn't mean He's not around — it just means you have to find Him. God is present in the workings of history. He's just behind the scenes. The historical events of Purim seem, themselves, to suggest this theological message.

Rabbi David Fohrman, *The Queen you Thought you Knew*, (USA: OU Press, 2011), p.10

- **What is one way that you have seen God's hand in your own life?**
- **Even though not explicit, in what ways do we see God's workings in Jewish history?**

Human Fragility

While God's name never appears explicitly, God's presence is stamped on virtually every word in the Megilla. Through a series of unfortunate events, fate ensures that no character is absolved of the kind of life reversal that reminds us as readers of the fragility of the human condition. The tensile vulnerability suggests a world in constant flux, where one's ascent represents another's descent and vice versa. It is a world that can be naught but a fragile place.

Dr. Erica Brown, *Esther: Power, Fate, and Fragility in Exile* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2020), p.22

- **How does the absence of God's name in the Megilla enhance the reader's understanding of the fragility of the human condition?**
- **Have you ever had a life reversal or experience that made you more aware of the fragility of the human condition?**

Renewal of the Covenant

On Purim we celebrate not only the annulment of Haman's decree, but also the renewal of the covenant, as Chazal interpret: "*Kiyemu ve-kibelu*" (Esther 9:27) — they affirmed what they had already received" (*Shabbat* 88a). For this reason, Esther emerges as the heroine of the story, rather than Mordekhai. Mordekhai was a Jerusalemite. He encountered no dilemma; for him, the covenant was never in question. Esther, however, had no father or mother. She experienced the internal struggle and confrontation of Diaspora Jewry. Megillat Esther is the story of this dilemma, whether to identify with Am Yisrael, or to accept the vanities of the local population. "They re-accepted [the Torah] during the times of Achashverosh" (ibid.). They reaffirmed the Torah's relevance to all times, to all places, under all

conditions. The renewal of the covenant commemorated on Purim came on the heels of the exile, of this encounter — specifically, from the questioning of the covenant that resulted from this encounter.

R. Mosheh Lichtenstein, Purim, Holiday of Covenant and Salvation, etzion.org, 21.09.2014, <https://etzion.org.il/en/holidays/purim/purim-holiday-covenant-and-salvation>

- **How do you think R. Lichtenstein's understanding of the Purim story has relevance to the world we live in today?**
- **Have you ever needed to "reaccept the Torah" by making a difficult decision about your own Torah observance?**



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WHEN IGNORANCE IS BLISS: THE ANTINOMIANISM OF PURIM AND SHIRAS HAAZINU

A Halacha That Defies the Spirit of Conventional Halachic Norms

One of the most enigmatic practices cited in *Shulchan Aruch* is the Talmudic dictum known as “*ad de’loyada*.” חייב אדם לבסומי בפוריא עד - “One must become intoxicated on Purim until he can no longer distinguish between ‘Cursed be Haman’ and ‘Blessed be Mordechai’” (*Megilla* 7b), which, taken at face value, requires one to imbibe until becoming “stone-drunk.” The Rama (*Orach Chaim* 695:2), in apparent deference to the potentially devastating consequences inherent in a literal compliance with this halacha, cites a view that the

obligation may be discharged by drinking more than one is accustomed and falling asleep. The *Mishna Berura*, citing *Pri Megadim*, recommends that Rama’s protocol be adopted as standard practice.

Notwithstanding Rama’s “scaled down” approach to fulfilling *ad de’loyada*, the underlying rationale for this halacha remains elusive. The requirement to imbibe and engage in a degree of inebriation is starkly at odds with the Torah’s ubiquitous calls for restraint and moderation within the realm of physical pleasures. Similarly, the purposeful diminution of one’s conscious waking faculties for no apparent reason other than simply producing a state of slumbers seems,

as a matter of religious imperative, equally incongruous.

Commentaries over the ages have grappled with these questions and have suggested several explanations. These include the following:

1. Many of the pivotal events in the Purim narrative were associated with lavish feasts accompanied by drink (i.e. the banquets of Achashveirosh, Vashti, and Esther). Consequently, “partying” on Purim carries within it an element of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle).
2. Unlike Chanuka, where the Jews encountered religious persecution, Haman’s attempt at

genocide posed a solely physical threat. Accordingly, the Purim commemoration stresses elements that are distinctly physical.

I would like to suggest a new interpretation for *ad de'loyada* in light of the background and literary structure of *Shiras Ha'azinu*, the poetic exultation which Moshe Rabbeinu was instructed to teach B'nei Yisrael as one of his final tasks before departing the world.

Shiras Ha'azinu: An Overview

The backdrop for *Shiras Ha'azinu* can be found in the following pesukim that appear toward the conclusion of Parshas VaYeilech (Devarim 31:16-21):

(טז) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנֵּה שָׁכַב עִם אֲבוֹתֶיךָ וְקָם הָעָם הַזֶּה וְזָנְהוּ אַחֲרַי אֱלֹהֵי נֹכַח הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הוּא בָּא שָׁמָּה בְּקִרְבוֹ וְעִזְבוּנִי וְהִפְרָ אֶת בְּרִיתִי אֲשֶׁר כָּרַתִּי אִתּוֹ: (יז) וְחָרָה אַפִּי בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וְעִזְבוּתִים וְהִסְתַּרְתִּי פָנַי מֵהֶם וְהָיָה לְאֹכַל וּמִצָּאָהוּ רַעוּת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְאָמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא הֲלֹא עַל כִּי אֵין אֶלָּקִים בְּקִרְבִּי מִצְאוּנֵי הָרָעוּת הָאֵלֶּה: (יח) וְאֲנֹכִי הִסְתַּר אֶסְתִּיר פָּנַי בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא עַל כֹּל הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כִּי פָנָה אֶל אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים: (יט) וְעַתָּה כְּתֹב וְדַשְׁנוּ לְכֶם אֶת הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וּלְמַדָּה אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמְחָה בְּפִיהֶם לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִנְיֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (כ) כִּי אֲבִיאֲנֹךְ אֶל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָם וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה אֲנִי עוֹשֶׂה לְעֵלְמָה: (כא) וְהָיָה כִּי תִמְצָאֵן אֹתוֹ רַעוּת רַבּוֹת וְצָרוֹת וְעַתָּה הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְפָנָיו לְעֵד כִּי לֹא תִשְׁכַּח מִפִּי זֶרְעוֹ כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת יְצִרְוֹ אֲשֶׁר הוּא עוֹשֶׂה הַיּוֹם בְּטַרְם אֲבִיאֲנֹךְ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי:

Hashem said to Moshe: Behold you will lie with your forefathers, but this people will rise up and stray after the gods of the foreigners of the Land, in whose midst it is coming, and it will forsake Me and annul My covenant that I have sealed with it. My anger will flare against it on that day and I will forsake them; and I will conceal My face from them and they will become

prey, and many evils and distresses will encounter it. It will say on that day, 'Is it not because my G-d is not in my midst that these evils have come upon me?' But I will surely have concealed My face on that day because of all the evil that it did for it had turned to gods of others. So now, write this song for yourselves, and teach it to the Children of Israel, place it in their mouth, so that this song shall be for Me a witness against the Children of Israel. For I shall bring them to the Land that I swore to their forefathers, which flows with milk and honey, but it will eat, be sated, and grow fat, and turn to gods of others and serve them, it will provoke Me and annul My covenant. It shall be that when many evils and distresses come upon it, then this song shall speak up before it as a witness, for it shall not be forgotten from the mouth of its offspring, for I know its inclination, what it does today before I bring them to the Land that I have sworn'.

These pesukim depict a dark chapter of Jewish history replete with intense suffering (רעות רבות וצרות), “Many evils and distresses” – v. 17) and characterized by *hester panim*, the concealment of the Divine Countenance (v. 17-18). The state of *hester panim* is described as being a direct consequence of the nation’s turn to idolatry, which was preceded by overindulgence in material pleasures (ואכל ושבע ודשן), “It will eat, be sated, and grow fat” – v. 20). All of this would be borne out in the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu*, which Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbeinu to record and teach B'nei Yisrael as a lesson for posterity.

The chain of events recounted in this series of pesukim form a distinct theme within *Shiras Ha'azinu* that can be readily discerned in a cursory reading. After extolling Hashem’s love for B'nei Yisrael, as demonstrated by His providing for their every

need and comfort, the song foretells how the Jewish nation’s exposure to material pleasure would eventually lead them to rebel: וישמן ישרון ויבעט, “Jeshurun became fat and kicked” (Devarim 32:15) - and substitute their allegiance to Hashem for the worship of alien gods. The *shira* goes on to recount how the Jews’ embrace of idolatry would cause G-d to hide His countenance: ויאמר אסתירה פני, מהם, “And He said, ‘I will hide My face from them’ (v. 20)). This state of *hester panim* would be accompanied by great suffering entailing dreadful consequences for both young and old (v. 21-26).

Hashem’s “Unconditional Guarantee”

Despite its harsh tone, *Shiras Ha'azinu* concludes on a positive note not explicitly spelled out in Parshas Va'Yeilech — namely, Hashem’s subsequent defense of his people as manifested by His wreaking vengeance upon Israel’s enemies for spilling the blood of His servants (v. 35-43).

(לה) לִי נָקָם וְשִׁלְמִים לְעַת תִּמּוּט רַגְלֶם כִּי קָרוֹב יוֹם אִידָם וְחָשׂ עֲתֹדֶת לְמוֹ: (לו) כִּי דִין ה' עִמּוֹ וְעַל עֲבָדָיו יִתְנַחֵם כִּי יִרְאֶה כִּי אֶזְלַת יָד וְאָפַס עֲצוֹר וְעֹזֹב: (לז) וְאָמַר אֵי אֱלֹהֵימוֹ צוֹר חָסִיוֹ בּוֹ: (לח) אֲשֶׁר חָלַב זִבְחֵימוֹ יֹאכְלוּ יִשְׁתּוּ יִין נְסִיכִים יְקוּמוּ וַיַּעֲזֹרְכֶם יְהִי עֲלֵיכֶם סִתְרָה: (לט) רְאוּ עַתָּה כִּי אֲנִי אֲנִי הוּא וְאֵין אֱלֹקִים עִמָּדִי אֲנִי אֲמִית וְאַחִיהָ מִחֲצֵתִי וְאֲנִי אֲרַפָּא וְאֵין מִיָּדִי מִצִּיל: (מ) כִּי אֲשָׂא אֶל שָׁמַיִם יָדִי וְאֲמַרְתִּי חִי אֲנֹכִי לְעֵלְמָם: (מא) אִם שְׁנוֹתַי בְּרַק חֲרָבִי וְתֹאחֲזוּ בְּמִשְׁפַּט יָדִי אֲשִׁיב נָקָם לְצָרֵי וְלִמְשַׁנְּאֵי אֲשִׁלֵּם: (מב) אֲשִׁפִּיר חֲצֵי מִדָּם וְחֲרָבִי תֹאכַל בְּשֶׁר מִדָּם חָלַל וְשִׁבְיָה מִרָאשׁ פְּרָעוֹת אוֹיֵב: (מג) הֲרִנֵּנוּ גוֹיִם עִמּוֹ כִּי דָם עֲבָדָיו יְקוּם וְנָקָם יִשִּׁיב לְצָרֵינוּ וְכִפַּר אֲדָמָתוֹ עִמּוֹ *Mine is vengeance and recompense, At the time that their foot falters. For the day of their disaster is near, and destiny rushes upon them. When Hashem will vindicate*

His people, He will relent regarding His servants, When He sees that their might is gone, and none is saved or assisted. He will say: "Where are their gods, the rock in whom they sought refuge, who ate the fat of their offerings and drank their libation wine? Let them rise up to your help, and let them be a shield unto you! See, then, that I, I am He; There is no god beside Me. I deal death and give life; I wounded and I will heal: None can deliver from My hand. For I raise My hand to heaven And say: 'As I live forever, if I whet My flashing blade And My hand lays hold on judgment, vengeance will I wreak on My foes, and upon those that hate Me shall I bring retribution. I will make My arrows drunk with blood— As My sword devours flesh— Blood of the slain and the captive, because of the earliest depredations of the enemy. O nations, acclaim His people! For He will avenge the blood of His servants; He will wreak vengeance on His foes, And cleanse the land and His people.

The Ramban, in his closing comments to *Shiras Ha'azinu*, notes that this divine gesture appears to be

The lasting legacy of *Shiras Ha'azinu* lies in its guarantee that despite the Jewish people's lowly spiritual state and the cycle of suffering generated in its wake, Israel will nonetheless survive, due retribution will be meted out to her foes, and atonement will be attained "le'maan shemo" for the sake of G-d's holy name."

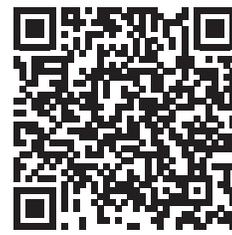
unconditional — unrelated to, and independent of, the possibility of Israel's repentance. It is a natural response to Israel's state of utter helplessness coupled with the specter of *chilul Hashem* (desecration of Hashem's name). Indeed, Ramban explains, the lasting legacy of *Shiras Ha'azinu* lies in its guarantee that despite the Jewish people's lowly spiritual state and the cycle of suffering generated in its wake, Israel will nonetheless survive, due retribution will be meted out to her foes, and atonement will be attained "le'maan shemo" for the sake of G-d's holy name." This comforting message, concludes the Ramban, serves as a profound and powerful testament to the future redemption. In Ramban's immortal words:

והנה אין בשירה הזאת תנאי בתשובה ועבודה, רק היא שטר עדות שנעשה הרעות ונוכל, ושהוא יתברך יעשה בנו בתוכחות חימה, אבל לא ישבית זכרנו, וישוב ויתנחם ויפרע מן האויבים בחרבו הקשה והגדולה והחזקה, וכפר על חטאתינו למען שמו. אם כן, השירה הזאת הבטחה מבוארת בגאולה העתידה על כרחן של מינין.

Now, there is no stipulation in this song regarding repentance or service of G-d; rather, it is a testimonial document that we will commit evils and emerge whole, and that the Blessed One will act toward us with wrathful rebukes, but will not obliterate our memory, and He turn back and relent and exact retribution from the enemies with His harsh, great and mighty sword, and He will atone for our sins for His Name's sake. Hence, this song is an explicit assurance of the future redemption despite the wishes of the heretics.

Parallels Between Purim and Shiras Ha'azinu

The Purim narrative, in fact, closely shadows the theme of *Shiras Ha'azinu*. The story is set in the Persian Diaspora



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during a period characterized by *hester panim*, which, as foretold in *Shiras Ha'azinu*, was a direct consequence of the Jews' endemic embrace of idolatry during their stay in the land of Israel. The parallel between the *hester panim* described in *Shiras Ha'azinu* and that of the Purim story is implicit in the Talmudic statement which finds scriptural allusion to Esther's name in the verse אסתיר פני — "And I will surely have concealed My face from them" (Devarim 31:18; *Chullin* 139b) which, as noted, refers to the events recounted in *Ha'azinu*. Additionally, the verse, אמרת - "I had said, 'I will scatter them, I will cause their memory to cease from Man'" (Devarim 32:26), found in *Shiras Ha'azinu*, may well be a reference to the danger of physical oblivion that loomed over the Jewish people in the wake of the decree of Achashveirosh. Understood in this light, the sudden and miraculous turn of events in the Purim narrative, culminating in the Jews' taking revenge against their enemies, represents not a divine

deliverance in response to sincere repentance, but rather a fulfillment of the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu* that when all else fails, G-d ultimately intervenes on behalf of His people, saves them from the brink of annihilation, and ensures that justice is meted out against Israel's foes.

Overindulgence and the “Slippery Slope”

This parallel between Purim and *Shiras Ha'azinu* may lie at the heart of the “partying” nature of Purim and its jarring inconsistency with mainstream Torah sensitivities. Inasmuch as *Shiras Ha'azinu* specifically identifies indulging in physical pleasures as being the initial stage of a potential “slippery slope” leading to *hester panim* and the grave troubles generated in its wake, it is perhaps ironically appropriate that Purim, whose very essence serves as validation of the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu*, entails an obligation to engage — for this one day — in atypical revelry, in order to symbolically affirm that although such tendencies normally pave a dangerous path of *hester panim* fraught with calamity, suffering, and despair, the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu* forever stands as a guarantee

of divine protection. In a similar vein, the Rama's advocating slumber precipitated by drink as an enactment of *ad de'loyada* conveys the symbolic message that even when the Jewish people find themselves “asleep” and hence, most vulnerable, they may rest assured that *הנה לא ינום ולא יישן שומר ישראל* — “The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers (Tehillim 121:4), as expressed in the testimony of *Shiras Ha'azinu*.

Purim and Yom Kippur: Two Models for the Eradication of Evil

This analysis may shed light on the striking observation of the Arizal highlighting an association between Purim and Yom Kippurim, the latter of which can be constructed to read “*Yom Ki-Purim*” “a day like Purim.”

At first glance, these two days could seemingly not be further apart! Upon further analysis, however, we can discern a common symbolic theme of “vanquishing evil,” as expressed in overcoming the *yetzer hara* (the Evil inclination) in the case of Yom Kippur and the victory over Haman, descendant of Amalek, on Purim. Consequently, the polar tendencies that characterize Yom Kippur and

Purim—the former marked by self-denial and increased vigilance, the latter by levity and letting down one's guard—may perhaps correspond to the two sections in the Torah that speak of the eradication for Amalek, the personification of evil. In Parshas Ki Seitzei (Devarim 25:19) the Torah instructs: *תמחה את זכר עמלק*, “You shall erase the name of Amalek,” placing the onus upon the Jewish nation. By contrast, in Parshas BeShalach (Shemos 17:14), the Torah emphasizes *מחה אמחה את זכר עמלק*, “I shall obliterate the name of Amalek.” The model of Yom Kippur, on the one hand, corresponds to *תמחה את זכר עמלק* which demands ongoing vigilance in the struggle against evil. This approach is clearly in sync with the dominant Torah norm of limiting and controlling excesses. The Purim model, on the other hand, is patterned after that of *מחה אמחה את זכר עמלק*, symbolizing periods when the Jewish people find themselves “asleep,” helplessly mired in sin and trapped in the clutches of evil with no recourse of defense. At times like these, the guarantee of *Shiras Ha'azinu* emerges in the form of divine intervention to overcome the forces of evil. May we all merit to witness the eradication of evil, whatever the means, speedily in our days.



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“THERE ONCE WAS A MAN:” SINGULARITY AND SOLITUDE IN MEGILLAT ESTHER

One of the most troubling verses in *Megillat Esther* has nothing to do with the terrible decree Haman enacted. It has to do with five simple words that can be easily overlooked: “In the capital Shushan lived a Jew (*ish Yehudi haya b’Shushan ha-bira*) by the name of Mordechai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite” (Est. 2:5). We are introduced to Mordechai as if he were the only Jew living in Shushan, as if no other inhabited the king’s capital city or perhaps any of the 127 provinces in Achashverosh’s vast empire. Mordechai asks that Esther initially hide her identity. This further cements the eerie sense that Mordechai was singularly alone as a man of faith in Persia, much the way that visitors touring countries once dense with Jews might be introduced to a city’s very last Jew.

This description is disquieting because much later in the narrative, in chapter eight, Shushan is suddenly filled with Jews celebrating permission to defend themselves: “And in every province and in every city, when the king’s command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them” (Est. 8:17). Being Jewish was suddenly so desirable that others, for either genuine or opportune reasons, wanted to convert. In the next chapter, we also meet Jews battling for their very lives: “Throughout the provinces of King Achashverosh, the Jews mustered in their cities to attack those who sought their hurt; and no one could withstand them, for the

fear of them had fallen upon all the peoples” (Est. 9:2). Again, the Jews in strength and number outpaced their Persian enemies. Where were all these Jews in the opening chapters of the book?

While many of the classic commentators, like Rashi and Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra, are notably silent about the word ‘*ish*’ in our verse, R. Yosef ibn Yahya draws attention to the uniqueness implied in the term: “It suggests [one] great in quality.” It’s not that Mordechai was the only Jew but that his personality, leadership, and righteousness made him stand out among his coreligionists.

Another likely explanation is that there were other Jews in Shushan and its environs at this time, but this

detail is not the story's central interest. Instead, the narrative positions one man against another as archetypes. The Talmud highlights this explanation by contrasting the 'ish,' in our verse, Esther 2:5, to its appearance in a later verse, Esther 7:6: "A man [ish] who is an adversary and an enemy, this evil Haman."¹ Mordechai as a man is contrasted with Haman as a man; this distinction pits goodness against evil, light against darkness, and wisdom against might. Elsewhere, the Talmud reads 'ish' as a word that implies extraordinary and unusual strength.²

Yet there is another reading of this five-word expression that invites us to pause, to notice, and then to experience a moment of intentional disequilibrium when we listen to the story on Purim. Mordechai was not only a man but *the* man in the Megilla because he alone was acutely aware of his status as an exile, as we read in the verse that follows; he "had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah,

To be a Jew in the diaspora requires deliberate effort and the creation of communities of intention because the national structures that support Jewish identity are notably absent.

which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon" (Est. 2:6). This description modifies and amplifies Mordechai's identity as someone who was profoundly shaped by the experience of exile. In so doing, the verse captures the solitude of Jewish identity in the diaspora. In Persia, without the collective Jewish national framework that confers dignity and distinctiveness to every individual, each Jew in the diaspora is inherently and existentially alone with his or her own faith.

This combination of conviction and vulnerability is a continuous feature of an exilic existence for committed Jews throughout history. Life is different when Jews have political autonomy. Contemporary Israeli philosopher, Micha Goodman, for example, names four components of identity that make life in the State of Israel profoundly Jewish: location, the nationality of its Jewish citizens, its calendar, and its language, Hebrew. As a result, authenticity in Israel becomes the very air that Jewish citizens of the State inhale. Not one of these factors exists for Jews in the diaspora.

To be a Jew in the diaspora requires deliberate effort and the creation of communities of intention because the national structures that support Jewish identity are notably absent. Sometimes Jewish communities reflect such a high degree of conscious creation that those living in them may dismiss how characteristic calendar and language, for example, are to one's identity. Over time, diaspora Jews may even risk believing that such

scaffolding is unnecessary to their Jewishness, as is sadly true for many Jews living in America today.

Those in the diaspora — we — cannot rely upon an organic, natural sense of Jewishness that is as foundational to national existence as breathing. Goodman notes of diaspora Jews that, "... precisely because Judaism is not indigenous, they have to create communities in which it can be practiced. Precisely because Jewish continuity is not assured, they have to fight for it. For the Chosen People, Judaism can never rest. For the Choosing People, it is a constant battle to keep it awake."³

Decades earlier, Rabbi Soloveitchik described the absence of this collective spirit in the diaspora as a source of profound loneliness and the State of Israel as a nation alone:

*The aloneness of the Jewish people today is very pronounced. The existence of the state dovetails with this aloneness... the aloneness of the Jewish people is one of the clear signs of the nation which exists as a chosen nation. The aloneness is a result of the election [of the Jewish people]. A great individual is lonely. Moses, our teacher, was lonely. A great nation is lonely. This is part of the covenant that God established with the Jewish people. That is part of what makes it unique. A lonely individual is creative. A lonely nation is also a creative one.*⁴

Returning to the Megilla, Mordechai was cloaked in a faith ignored or misunderstood. Mordechai, in exile, could not and would not fit in. He chose to embrace his differences and not renege on his commitments. This



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dissonance is the source of heartache, but, as Rabbi Soloveitchik explains, it may also be the source of Mordechai's creativity and his ambition. Lacking a supportive, collective, and autonomous existence, Mordechai had to forge a covenantal community of purpose and piety alone.

By the end of the book, however, Mordechai was successful beyond his wildest dreams: "For Mordecai was now powerful in the royal palace, and his fame was spreading through all the provinces; the *man* Mordecai was growing ever more powerful" (Est. 9:4). The term '*ish*' repeats itself here to let us know that Mordechai was the same man with the same values at the beginning of the book and at its end. He did not erase his spiritual distinctiveness, neither when facing persecution nor when robed in Persian splendor. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that we can achieve greatness wherever we are: "Israel does not negate the diaspora, because Judaism is a matter of holy lives as well as holy places."⁵

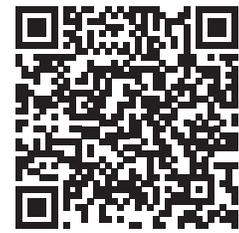
But diaspora success has a cut-off.

There are only three verses in the last chapter of the scroll, as if the happy ending in Persia is itself short-lived. The book leaves us wondering if feeling lonely in the diaspora is not only our fate but is also and ironically a prerequisite for sustaining spiritual wholeness. "There is nothing inevitable about Jewish identity in the diaspora," writes Rabbi Sacks, "and there never was. In Israel one is Jewish by living in a Jewish state, surrounded by a Jewish culture and Jewish institutions. But elsewhere, being Jewish means going against the grain, being counter-cultural."⁶

Could it be that the true spiritual danger of life in the diaspora is not feeling alone; it is paradoxically when we stop feeling alone?

Endnotes

1. BT *Megillah* 12a.
2. JT *Megillah* 2:4:2.
3. Micah Goodman, *The Wondering Jew: Israel and the Search for Jewish Identity* (New Haven: Yale, 2020), p. 99.
4. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "On Israel, the Diaspora and Religious Issues,"



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Community, Covenant and Commitment, Toras HoRav Foundation (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2005), p. 233. This was part of an interview conducted by Levi Yitzhak Yerushalmi with the Rav that was published in *Ma'ariv* on September 15, 1975.

5. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Crisis and Covenant: Jewish Thought After the Holocaust*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 108.

6. Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren? (Elstree, UK: Vallentine Mitchell, 1994), p. 38.

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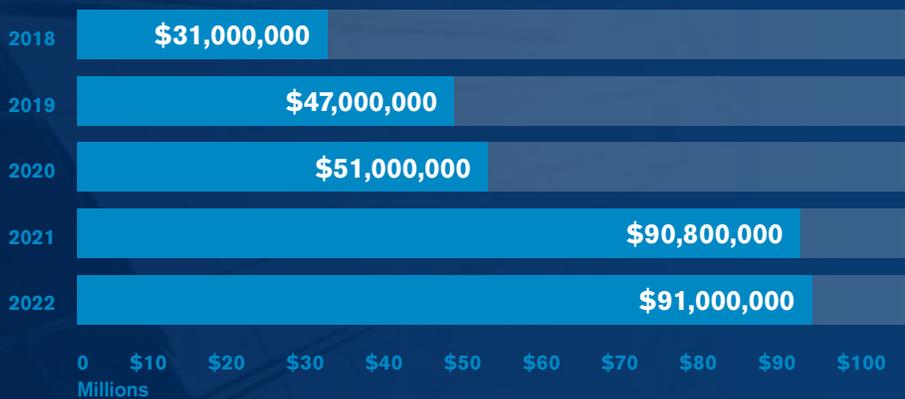
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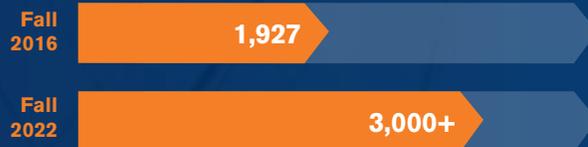
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EXCERPTS FROM BATEI YOSEF

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A Deaf Person Reading the Megillah

The *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 689:2, states regarding the reading of the Megillah:

אחד הקורא ואחד השומע מן הקורא, יצא ידי חובתו. והוא שישמע ממי שהוא חייב בקריאתה. לפיכך, אם היה הקורא חרש או קטן או שוטה, השומע ממנו לא יצא.

Whether one reads or hears from the reader, one fulfills the obligation, as long as he hears from someone who is obligated to read it. Therefore, if the reader is deaf, a minor or deranged, the listener doesn't fulfill the obligation.

The source for the idea that one can fulfill the mitzvah of Megillah by listening to its reading is the Yerushalmi (*Megillah* 4:1). Rambam (*Hilchos Megillah* 1:2) codifies this idea in stating that one can fulfill by listening, as long as the reader himself is obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of Megillah.

Rabbi Soloveitchik noted that while our version of Rambam does not mention a *cheresh* (deaf person) as one of the people who is not obligated to read, there are older versions that do. Furthermore, *Shulchan Aruch* clearly does state that one cannot fulfill the mitzvah by listening to the reading of a *cheresh*. However, one must ask: if the *cheresh* is reading the Megillah, he is clearly not a deaf-mute (the deaf-mute is exempt from the mitzvah of Megillah). As such, why can't such a *cheresh* read on behalf of others? He too is, ostensibly, obligated to perform the mitzvah of Megillah.

Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that we see from here that part of the mitzvah of Megillah is to actually hear the Megillah. Indeed, there are two aspects to this mitzvah: to read the Megillah and to hear the Megillah. Reading the Megillah can be accomplished either by actually

reading the words of the Megillah oneself or by listening to someone else read the Megillah and thereby fulfilling the mitzvah through the mechanism of *shomei'a k'oneh* (through which the listener is like the reader). Yet there is an additional aspect, hearing the Megillah, which is a function of the obligation of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle, see *Beis Yosef* 689 who connects hearing the Megillah with *pirsumei nisa*). The *cheresh*, who cannot hear his own reading, is exempt from that aspect of the mitzvah. He cannot read on behalf of others because he does not share the same obligation as others since he is exempt from the requirement to hear the Megillah.

Megillah Reading as a Form of Tefillah

The *Shulchan Aruch* 689:5, states:

מקום שאין מנין, אם אחד יודע והאחרים אינם יודעים, אחד פוטר את כולם, ואם כולם יודעים, כל אחד קורא לעצמו.

In a place without a minyan where one person knows how to read and the others don't, that person can read on behalf of others. If they all know how to read, each one should read for himself.

The *Shulchan Aruch* rules that when there is no minyan, one person should not read on behalf of others unless the others don't know how to read themselves. Why should this be so? Don't we generally allow one person to recite something on behalf of others who will fulfill the mitzvah by listening (such as is typically done with kiddush)? *Magen Avraham*, 689:10, suggests that the reading of the Megillah has the status of tefillah (prayer), and when it comes to prayer, one cannot pray on behalf of another other than in the context of a minyan or if the listener does not know how to pray himself.

Why should the reading of the Megillah have the status of tefillah? Rabbi Soloveitchik offered two suggestions. First, the Gemara,

Megillah 14a, quotes one opinion that the reason we don't recite Hallel on Purim is that the reading of the Megillah is actually a form of Hallel. When it comes to Hallel, *Magen Avraham* himself (422:5) writes that one person cannot recite it on behalf of another (if the second person knows how to recite Hallel). As such, it makes sense that Megillah reading, which is a substitute for Hallel, would follow the same rules.

Along the same lines, the Vilna Gaon, in his commentary to *Shulchan Aruch* 690:17, explains that the practice during Megillah reading that the entire congregation reads four verses of redemption aloud is based on the Gemara, *Sotah* 30b. The Gemara gives a few examples which illustrate that whenever there is an expression of *shira* (song), it is recited responsively. Rabbi Soloveitchik explained that according to the Vilna Gaon, we read certain verses aloud because the reading of the Megillah is a form of Hallel, and therefore there should be portions, specifically those that relate to redemption, that are read responsively.

Second, perhaps *Magen Avraham's* comparison of Megillah to tefillah isn't specifically focused on Megillah as a form of Hallel, but rather the reading

of the Megillah as an actual tefillah. The Gemara, *Megillah* 4b, states:

אריב"ל חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה בלילה ולשנותה ביום שנאמר (תהלים כב, ג) אלקי אקרא יומם ולא תענה ולילה ולא דומיה לי ... אמר רבי חלבו אמר עולא ביראה חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה בלילה ולשנותה ביום שנאמר (תהלים ל, יג) למען יזמרך כבוד ולא ידום ה' אלקי לעולם אודך.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: A person is obligated to read the Megillah at night and repeat it during the day, as it is says, "My God, I call by day, but You do not answer; and at night, and there is no quiet for me" (Psalms 22:3). R. Chelbo said in the name of Ulah Bira'ah, A person is obligated to read the Megillah at night and repeat it during the day, as it is says, "So that my glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent. Hashem, my God, I will give thanks to You forever." (Psalms 30:13)

There are two verses that serve as the basis for reading the Megillah at night in addition to during the day. The second verse (Psalms 30:13) discusses giving thanks to Hashem forever. This is an expression of Hallel. The first verse, however, discusses calling out to Hashem even in difficult times. This is an expression of tefillah, and as such, by invoking the first verse as a source for reading the Megillah (at night), the Gemara is indicating that Megillah reading is a form of tefillah.



How is it a form of prayer? Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that the Megillah is, in its most basic form, a story of the Jewish people who were in trouble and cried out to Hashem with the result that He ultimately saved them. When we read the Megillah, we are similarly asking Hashem to save us from our oppressors at all times.

If the Megillah reading is indeed an actual form of tefillah, we can understand why when there is no minyan, one who knows how to read the Megillah should not listen to someone else read it but should read it himself.

Eating the Purim Seudah at Night

The *Shulchan Aruch* 695:1, states:

סעודת פורים שעשאה בלילה לא יצא ידי חובתו.

One does not fulfill the obligation of eating the Purim meal if it is eaten at night.

Shulchan Aruch's ruling is based on the Gemara, *Megillah* 7b, and refers to someone who eats the meal at the very beginning of Purim at night. Rabbi Soloveitchik asked, how could we possibly think that one could fulfill the obligation by eating the night before? Even if the obligation of *simcha* (which serves as the basis for the requirement to have a meal) would indeed be applicable at night, which itself is not so clear, eating a meal at night would not discharge the obligation to eat another meal during the day, as we find regarding Yom Tov. If someone ate a Yom Tov meal at night, he is still obligated to eat another one during the day. If so, why did the Gemara find it necessary to tell us explicitly that one does not fulfill the obligation to have a meal during the day by eating at night?

Rabbi Soloveitchik suggested that the obligation of *simcha* on Purim is fundamentally different from the obligation of *simcha* on Yom Tov.

On Yom Tov, *simcha* is part of the essence of the day. As such, there is an obligation to eat one meal at night and another one during the day. However, *simcha* on Purim is not part of the essence of the day, but rather one of the mitzvos of the day. At some point during the day of Purim, there is a mitzvah to rejoice with a festive meal. As such, if the timeframe of the mitzvah would have included the night before, one could theoretically eat a meal at night and discharge the obligation without having to eat another meal during the day. The Gemara therefore tells us that in fact there is no obligation at all at night, and any meal that one does eat at night does not in any way impact the obligation to eat a meal during the day of Purim.



The Batei Yosef series is a RIETS Press publication dedicated in memory of Rabbi Joseph and Pepa Karasick, z”l. This series highlights the Torah and practices of the Rav, zt”l, Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, as well as halakhic rulings of the RIETS Roshei Yeshiva and poskim—in particular, Rabbi Hershel Schachter and Rabbi Mordechai Willig.

The presentation that appears above is an English summary of three of the essays that appear in the recently released volume on Chanukah and Purim. These essays are available here. This volume as well as the volume on Elul-Tishrei are available for purchase online.

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INSIGHTS INTO THE PERSONALITIES OF THE MEGILLAH

FROM MEMBERS OF STERN COLLEGE'S GRADUATE PROGRAM IN ADVANCED TALMUD/TANACH STUDIES

Vashti: Clearing the Stage for Esther's Performance

Zahava Fertig

At first glance, it's easy to view Vashti's role in Megillat Esther as a placeholder, since we know that her impending demise will clear the stage for Esther's grand entrance. Yet perhaps her role is ultimately critical to frame the course of events that follow.

The Megillah tells us in perek aleph that like Achashveirosh, Vashti had a party of her own. This pasuk refers to her as Vashti HaMalka instead of HaMalka Vashti, which Malbim uses to further prove Achashveirosh's intention to reduce Vashti's royal blood status to just the wife of the king.

But perhaps there is more to Vashti

than what meets the eye. After all, she is the first person to defy the king, something that Achashveirosh was terrified of. The text tells us (Esther 1:12), *vatima'ein hamalka Vashti*, she refused to be brought to the king. Vashti's refusal could be explained in two different ways.

1. Her refusal to be brought before the king was due to the way the king sent for her, i.e. with the king's officers and against her will (Malbim 1:10). Her act of defiance was a way for her to show that she was equally as powerful, haughty and deserving of honor as Achashveirosh was.
2. Her refusal was due to what was requested of her, i.e., out of embarrassment of being objectified before the king. Her refusal was more passive, she didn't mean to defy the king,

yet it was the only way for her to maintain some semblance of dignity and modesty.

Regardless, Achashveirosh now needed to affirm his superiority over her and use her as an example. This means that the rest of the Megillah will be viewed through the lens of Vashti's death and is a warning of what was in store for anyone who might disobey the king.

Vashti's refusal to come to Achashveirosh's party foreshadows the opposite story, in which Esther comes before the king on her own volition, when the king did *not* call her. The intensity grows as the reader knows what the king has done to someone who didn't come before him, and we can only imagine what will he do to someone who *does* come before him without permission. Through Vashti, we are now able to understand what

was so extraordinary about Esther when she risked her life to defy the king.

Why Hegai is Actually Pretty Great

Jordy Gross

Just as Esther is taken to the king's palace, forbidden from ever returning home, she encounters Hegai: the eunuch entrusted with Achashverosh's harem. While Esther's situation begins to feel hopeless, Chazal commonly perceive Hegai as a source of comfort or familiarity.¹ How did Hegai earn his favorable reputation?

Hegai is described as “*seris ha-melech shomer ha-nashim*.”² The term “*seris*,” generally translated as chamberlain or eunuch, appears sparsely throughout Tanach. There are only three *sarisim* in Tanach who are mentioned by name outside of Megillat Esther: Potiphar,³ Eved-Melech,⁴ and Ashpenaz.⁵ As with Esther, these *sarisim* appear at turning points for three other Biblical heroes: Yosef, Yirmiyahu, and Daniel. To better understand Hegai's character, let us briefly examine the significance of these *sarisim*.

Potiphar buys Yosef from the Yishmaelites, ultimately resulting in Yosef becoming second to the king and saving his family from famine. Eved-Melech rescues Yirmiyahu from a trench, enabling him to resume his efforts at saving Bnei Yisrael from the fate of exile. Ashpenaz favors Daniel — a grieving exile — giving him the opportunity to make a *kiddush Hashem* as an attendant of the king.

Each of these *sarisim* appears at a moment of transition between despair and hope. Rav Hirsch⁶ notes that the word “*saris*” comes from the

word “*sarsur*,” or agent, someone who manages and promotes the affairs of others. The *sarisim*⁷ of Megillat Esther are no exception. As Esther apprehensively faces an unknown future, she is greeted by Hegai, someone who she innately feels she can trust.⁸ He provides her with a sense of reassurance and sustenance and Esther becomes queen after following Hegai's advice.⁹ As in the rest of Tanach, the *saris* has a part in catapulting our hero from hopelessness to royalty, ultimately enabling her to save her people.

Endnotes

1. See discussion in *Megillah* 13a, regarding the special accommodations provided by Hegai for Esther as well as the *Yafeh Anaf* on *Esther Rabbah* 5:3.
2. Esther 2:3.
3. See Bereishit 37:36.
4. See Yirmiyahu 38:7.
5. See Daniel 1:3.
6. See Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch on Bereishit 37:36.
7. Although this piece focuses on the role of Hegai, other *sarisim* who appear in Megillat Esther include Charvonah, Bigtan, and Teresh, all of whom also play active roles in the salvation of Mordechai, Esther, and the Jewish people.
8. This can be gleaned from the text of the *Megillah* itself (Esther 2:15) and is described more explicitly by *Da'at Mikra* on Esther 2:15.
9. See Esther 2:15.

Haman

Neti Linzer

We tend to view Haman as the quintessential villain, and throughout the *Megillah* itself, his character is hardly developed beyond this stock portrayal. But a more vivid picture of his personality emerges from

Midrashim. I would like to focus on one such Midrash — a single line in the Gemara at the end of Chullin¹ — which I think exposes the psychological root of Haman's sin.

The Gemara asks: “*Haman min ha-Torah minayin?*,” where in the Pentateuch is there a reference to Haman? Leaving aside the valuable question of why the Gemara assumes that there *would* be such a reference, let us review the *pasuk* quoted in response: “*Ha-min ha-etz asher tzivitcha? L'bitli achal memenu achalta?*”² The superficial relationship between the *pasuk* and the person is clear — a wordplay on “*hamin*” and “*haman*” — but the substantive connection is entirely opaque. Chazal do not just draw willy-nilly comparisons when they see two words with the same letters. What, then, are we meant to learn about Haman's character?

Let us examine the *pasuk* in context. After Adam and Chava eat from the *Etz Ha-Da'at*, they are confronted by God, who asks them, “have you eaten from the tree which I commanded you not to eat?” Some commentators are sensitive to the fact that God does not refer to the tree as the *Etz Ha-Da'at* but simply as *ha-Etz asher tzivitcha* — the tree about which I commanded you. Among them is the Netziv,³ who explains that God did not prohibit the tree because there was something metaphysically harmful about it, but rather, because He wanted to give the first humans a prohibition in order to teach them that a higher power governed their desires. The tree's significance therefore lay solely in its being *ha-etz asher tzivitcha*, and it was only once Adam and Chava were punished with that *da'at tov v'rah*⁴ that it acquired its distinctive name. Viewed in this light, Adam and Chava

didn't desire the tree per se, but rather, they wished to live without any limits on their desires.

By connecting Haman to this *pasuk*, Chazal signal that he was motivated by the same drive, and this is borne out by his own words in the Megillah. Haman's most personally revealing remarks come when he confides in his wife and his loved ones: Haman complains that despite his riches, prominent sons,⁵ and high position, "*Kol zeh einenu shoveh li b'chol et asher ani ro'eh et Mordechai Ha-Yehudi yoshev b'sha'ar hamelech.*," all of this is worthless to me, as long as I see Mordechai the Jew sitting in the gateway of the palace. The behavior of a single individual — the fact that Mordechai refuses to bow to him — renders all the good in Haman's life worthless to him. Adam and Chava rebelled against divine limits on their desires, Haman adopts this attitude in the extreme, claiming that everything loses its meaning when a single thing is missing. Haman's hatred of Mordechai is therefore more than just an interpersonal sin — it is also a theological sin, a rebellion against the existence of a God Who sets limits on man. It is no wonder, then, that the Midrash tells us that when Adam sinned, God initially wanted to hang him on a tree, but He ultimately decided to save this tree for Haman.⁶

Our celebration of Purim represents an utter rejection of Haman's attitude. The Gemara tells us that one reason we do not recite Hallel on Purim is "*acati avdei Achashverosh anan,*"⁷ i.e., the salvation on Purim was incomplete. And yet, we rejoice on Purim nonetheless, recognizing the value of what we *did* gain, thanking the One who made our salvation possible, and refusing to adopt the all-

or-nothing attitude of "*kol zeh enenu shoveh li*" embodied by Haman.

Endnotes

1. *Chullin* 139b.
2. Bereishit 3:11.
3. *Ha'amek Davar*, Bereishit 3:11.
4. This approach appears to be difficult given that Hashem does call it the *Etz Ha-Da'at* in His original command to Adam. The Rosh, who shares the Netziv's view, explains that it was only called the *Etz Ha-Da'at* then based on what would happen in the future: "*v'hai d'matzinu Etz Ha-Da'at kodem achila katvu baTorah al shem ha-atid*" (Commentary of the Rosh, Bereishit 3:11).
5. While some commentaries interpret "*rov banav*" as a reference to his many sons, Ibn Ezra quotes the "*midakdikim*" who argue that there would be no reason for Haman to tell his wife how many sons the two of them have. "*Rov*" therefore must not be a reference to the number of children that Haman has, but to their prominence: "*gidulat banav.*" But Ibn Ezra argues that it also makes sense for Haman to speak about how many sons he has — not because he needs to inform his wife about the quantity — but because he is simply describing his good fortune in order to dramatize the point he is about to make.
6. This Midrash is quoted in the *Da'at Zekeinim of Ba'alei Tosafot* Bereishit 3:11.
7. *Megillah* 14a.

Achashverosh: Indifference, Loyalty, and Action

Leora (Moskowitz) Orenshein

While Esther emerges as the savior of Purim, Achashverosh is portrayed as completely wicked, as the Gemara tells us, "*hu b'risho metchilato v'ad sofo,*" he was wicked from beginning to end (*Megillah* 11a). However, neither seem to be acting on their own accord, so why do we hold them responsible for their actions? Esther consistently follows Mordechai's commands not

to reveal her nationality (Esther 2:10, 2:20), and to enter the king's chamber to petition for her people (Esther 4:14). Achashverosh similarly does what Haman tells him. Haman instructs Achashverosh to get rid of Vashti (Esther 1:19), to destroy the Jewish people (Esther 3:9), and to ride Mordechai on the king's horse (Esther 6:8). What, then, distinguishes Achashverosh from Esther? Why do we view Achashverosh in a negative light?

The difference becomes clear when we contrast their responses to key moments in leadership. Achashverosh hands over his signet ring twice in the Megillah, which is symbolic of his relinquishment of decision-making to others. At one of the most defining moments in his kingship, when he has the choice to save or destroy the Jewish people, he simply defers to others. Haman requests to destroy the Jewish people, and Achashverosh hands over his signet ring (Esther 3:10). Esther asks to save the Jewish people and Achashverosh hands over his signet ring, yet again (Esther 8:8). Achashverosh has no loyalties, and he consistently heeds what he is told by others.

Esther, on the other hand, rises above her passivity to save her nation. The most pivotal moment in the Megillah is when the Jews are faced with a decree of annihilation, and Mordechai tells Esther that she must enter the king's chamber and petition to save the Jews. Mordechai tells her, "For, if you remain silent at this time, relief and salvation will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if for a time such as this you attained royalty?" (Esther 4:14). When faced with the decision to risk her life to

save her people, Esther rises to the occasion.

Why does Esther emerge as our savior, while Achashverosh remains in our eyes as wicked? Rav Aharon Lichtenstein explains that when our care runs deep enough, it propels us to act. Esther is able to overcome her passive nature because of her deep concern for her people (*By His Light*, pg.154-158). Achashverosh, on the other hand, remains totally indifferent. As the Gemara tells us, he was a rasha “*metchilato v’ad sofo*” (*Megillah* 11a). From the beginning to the end of his kingship, Achashverosh never has a moment like Esther’s. Without a deep sense of care for his kingdom, nothing pushes him to take responsibility.

At those pivotal moments in our own lives, we must ask ourselves: when will we remain indifferent, and when will our care run so deeply that it brings us to action?

The point that distinguishes Esther from Achashverosh is the response to leadership: when faced with great power, who will assume the great responsibility that comes with it? When we are faced with pivotal moments in life, will we remain silent like Achashverosh, or rise to the occasion like Esther?

Mordechai: A Man Who Warrants Introduction

Sara Schatz

In his famous sonnet, William Shakespeare writes, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet.”¹ While Shakespeare argues that names are meaningless, Judaism subscribes to the opposite approach. We find in Parshat Lech-Lecha that

the very first Jew, Avraham Avinu, had his name changed by G-d in order to reorient his life’s mission: “but your name shall be Avraham, for I make you the father of a multitude of nations.”²

Oddly enough, however, Mordechai, one of the main protagonists of *Megillat Esther*, has a name with bizarre origins. In the *Da’at Mikra* commentary on Esther, famed Bible scholar Amos Hakham argues that the name Mordechai comes from the Babylonian god “Marduk.” Deported Jews of that generation had been forced to change their names to assimilated ones, in order to blur their Jewish identities.³ Yet despite Mordechai’s secular name, Chazal surprisingly attempt to search for its holy connotations. In *Mesechet Chullin*, Rav Mattana was asked the question, “*Mordechai min ha-Torah minayin?*,” “where is [the name] Mordechai [hinted] in the Torah?” Rav Mattana responds with a verse describing a spice from the anointing oil in the Mishkan, “*mar dror*,” “myrrh.”^{4,5} If Mordechai’s name historically comes from an assimilated background, why do Chazal try to infuse holiness within it? Shouldn’t we leave his name as is?

Perhaps we can answer this through a different mysterious identification of Mordechai. Interestingly, Mordechai is not introduced until the second chapter of Esther, *after* Achashverosh’s party. Addressing this delayed introduction, the midrash in *Esther Rabbah* compares Mordechai to Moshe, Shaul, and David HaMelech.⁶ All four of these leaders are introduced in the Torah as “redeemers” following a specific narrative: Moshe after description of Bnei Yisrael in slavery; Shaul following

attacks from outside nations; David after Goliath’s threat; and Mordechai after Achashverosh’s quest to find a new wife.⁷ However, there is a major difference between the first three leaders and Mordechai. While they are appointed through prophecy directly by G-d, Mordechai has no prophecy. Rather, Mordechai is anointed in the most inconspicuous way: his niece, Esther, wins Achashverosh’s heart, providing them an in within the royal palace, which would ultimately help them save the entire Jewish people from Haman’s wrath.

Perhaps this is where Chazal was coming from when comparing Mordechai’s name to the myrrh within the anointing oil. Mordechai, the Diasporic “*ish yehudi*” with a pagan name, single-handedly transforms his own identity by acting on behalf of his nation. Chazal thus fittingly compare him to “myrrh,” an ingredient in the anointing oil, because he was able to anoint himself to save the Jewish people. Through this, he turns into an example for all Diasporic generations to come, thereby securing Jewish continuity.

Endnotes

1. *Romeo and Juliet*, II, ii (47-48).
2. Bereshit 17:5.
3. See *Da’at Mikra*, *Megillat Esther* 2:6. A similar occurrence takes place in Daniel 1:7, where we witness King Belshazzar changing the names of Daniel, Chaniah, Mishael, and Azariah to names of Babylonian gods in order to further assimilate them into Babylonian society.
4. 139b.
5. Shemot 30:23.
6. 5:4.
7. See Shemot 3:7, Shmuel I 9:16, and Shmuel I 16:7-12.

This sermon was delivered by Rabbi Lamm at the Jewish Center on March 9, 1963. Reprinted with permission from The Lamm Heritage Archives (<https://www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage>)



THE ROYAL INSOMNIA

The turning point in the story of *Megillat Esther* comes at the beginning of Chapter VI when, with a special flourish, the reader informs us of what happened after Haman had prepared the tree with which to hang Mordecai, and Esther had invited the king and Haman to a second banquet. *Ba-lailah hahu nadedah shenat ha-melekh*, “on that night the king could not sleep” — literally, the sleep wandered from his eyes. And then the king commanded that there be brought before him the *sefer ha-zikhronot*, the book of records and chronicles. There he discovered the good that Mordecai had done for him by saving his life. From that moment on, the whole fortune of the Jews in the provinces of ancient Persia changed to the better. The king’s insomnia gave rise to the whole Purim story.

Rashi, desiring to emphasize the importance of the verse, seems, however, to overstate the case. He says: *nes haya* — it was a miracle. Sleeplessness a miracle? No doubt many of us would regard it as miraculous if we could sleep through one night undisturbed!

Perhaps Rashi’s point can better be understood by referring to the Talmud’s analysis of this royal insomnia. Raba teaches (*Megillah* 15b) that Ahasuerus was disturbed by the fact that Esther had invited Haman along to these banquets she had made for her husband. He tossed and turned and wondered, *dilma etza ka shakli iluyeh d’hahu gavra le’mikteleh*, perhaps the two of them, Esther and Haman are plotting to kill me. Then,

continued the king, why is there no man who likes me enough, who is sufficiently loyal to me, to apprise me of this conspiracy and save my life? *Hadar amar*, then Ahasuerus said to himself, perhaps there is someone who has done me a good turn but whom I have failed to compensate. Maybe I have been an ingrate, and therefore I have lost the loyalty of my friends. This is why he ordered the *sefer ha-zikhronot*, or chronicles, to be read to him. And indeed, he did recall the good Mordecai had done for him. Ahasuerus’ reward to Mordecai signaled the beginning of Israel’s salvation.

What we have here is a momentous moral teaching. As sensitive men and women, we often feel our security, our

safety, our positions threatened. We suffer sleepless nights and peaceless days and nights warding off envious competitors and real or imagined challenges and threats. That is only human. But we become truly *moral* beings when we take the giant step from blaming others for our misery to searching our own souls and hearts for the source of our troubles; from suspecting conspiring neighbors to analyzing the labyrinthian channels of our own selves.

What was truly remarkable was that Ahasuerus could achieve this moral stature. For a man like Ahasuerus whom Jewish tradition regards as, alternatively, a fool and a scoundrel (*melekh tipesh, melekh rasha*), to be able to cross the line from spy-hunting to soul-searching, was indeed a *nes*, a miracle. Yet this is what he did. The royal insomnia became a creative challenge. He converted it from a suspicion of plots by others to a discovery of shortcomings within himself; from outer subversion to inner corruption; from scheming courtiers to a seething conscience. The miracle or *nes* lay in the words *hadar amar*, “then he said”; in his ability to make the transition from a frightened animal afraid of others to a spiritual human being afraid of what he has found within himself. Indeed, for anyone to do that, even one who is not a *tipesh* or *rasha*, is only a trifle less than miraculous!

Do we not all of us have occasions when, in a deeper sense than the merely physical, our sleep is disturbed and we are plagued by all kinds of anxieties, by a vague restlessness and an unhappy lack of serenity?

The verse *ba-lailah hahu nadedah shenat ha-melekh* is true not only of the king on that one night, but of

most of us on most nights and days of the year. We moderns suffer from a great insomnia and a fearsome unhappiness. Our sleeplessness and sorrows drive us to the psychologists and psychiatrists in ever increasing numbers. Men are disturbed by threats to their business and professional standings. Women are concerned over challenges to their social or domestic positions. All of us are worried over our status in the eyes of our peers. And our restlessness and insomnia leads us to suspect others of nefarious plots, and we see evil and malice all about us. Our first conscious reaction to our own uneasiness is — to blame others. Children who cannot get along with parents are sure that they are hopelessly blind, rigid, insensitive, and unsympathetic. The failing student is positive his teacher is prejudiced against him. The newcomer is certain that those who have not given him the welcome he would like are snobbish, cold, clique-ridden.

The real miracle occurs when we have the moral courage to take the next and crucial step, *hadar amar*, and undertake a painful self-criticism. Children must examine their own conduct, as must parents who have no monopoly on virtue and righteousness. The student must recognize his own inadequate industriousness and zeal in studying. The newcomer must appreciate that he may be hyper-sensitive, and his personality may not always be the most engaging. Without overdoing self-accusation, and certainly without assuming guilt to the point of a neurosis, we must learn to find the source of our restlessness not in conspiracies but in our own consciences. On Purim an otherwise undistinguished Persian potentate points the way to spiritual progress:

hadar amar, from fear of what *others* may do *to me*, to a fear of what *I* may have *failed* to do *for* others. If we stop at the first step, then likely we are merely disturbed people, perhaps paranoid. If we make this transition to the second, we are then disturbing people, in the Prophetic tradition. This, then, is the royal insomnia's meaning for us: if modern man suffers a gnawing sleeplessness, it is not so much because of his oppressive outer world as because of his depressed inner life.

As a historic community, we Jews have made of this idea our central concept of history. Recognizing all the realities of political intrigue and military power balances and economic motivations, we have nevertheless interpreted our own history not in terms of battles and rebellions and balance of payments, but in categories of right and wrong, of reward and punishment, of deserving redemption or exile. No other people has ever had the moral daring to proclaim *u-mipnei hata'enu galinu me-artzenu*, that we were exiled from our homeland not alone because of Greek plotting or Roman might or Babylonian duplicity — but because of our own sins and moral and religious deficiencies. *Hadar amar* is the Jewish philosophy of history.

And in that case, we must not fail to interpret the events of our own day in the same morally self-critical manner. We are, as a Jewish community, aggrieved by the oppressive Sunday Blue Laws. No doubt we must each of us make every effort to secure a remedy from both the courts and the legislature to this grave injustice to Saturday Sabbath-observers. Yet we are ourselves partially at fault. If our non-Jewish neighbors would notice

a bit more *shemirat Shabbat* by Jews in general, their sympathy for our position would be more pronounced. Of course, this does not excuse them. But we must expect Sunday Blue Laws if we make of Saturday a red-letter day for shopping and secular activity.

Almost all of us, even those who favor a non-denominational prayer in the public schools, are deeply opposed to sectarian religious practices in the public schools. It is a justifiable, correct, and moral position. But if we, as Jews, encounter violent opposition, let us look within and determine whether indeed we are blameless. How many Jews observe the same holidays — Christian festivities — to which we object in the schools? How many Jewish offices celebrate with office parties, how many businesses with the colorful paraphernalia of the season, how many Jewish landlords place the characteristic trees in apartment houses that are almost totally Jewish-occupied? The non-Jew may be illogical, but there is a compelling persuasiveness to his rejoinder, “if it’s good enough for your office and parlor why not the school?” *Hadar amar* — without letting up in the struggle for justice, we must not overlook our shortcomings. We can no more afford to be arrogant and self-righteous as a community than we can as individuals.

Yet if our sleep wanders because of our personal, social, and communal relations, perhaps the most distressing restlessness of a man comes when his tranquility is marred and jarred

because of agonizing questions which he directs at his God. Some of us suffer illness, others privation; some loneliness, others grief; some feel life has passed us by, others that it has never given us a chance. And so we turn to God, each with his private misery, and a plaint breaks forth from our hearts: why, O Lord? Why did I deserve it?

The answer to such questions is never easy to find. General prescriptions will not help; blanket answers intended for all cases border on the ridiculous if not the hypocritical. It is here as Job and his friends learned, that faith must emerge and transcend all the questions and answers about human suffering.

Yet we are right in saying that in many cases, it is helpful, even urgent, to take that next step the *hadar amar*, and look within for the source of the trouble. Each must ask himself: perhaps I have been ungrateful? Perhaps I did not sufficiently appreciate a mate or a friend or a parent? Perhaps I did not use properly, wisely, and well the divine blessings of health, of wealth, of freedom, perhaps I hoarded life’s goods selfishly, and imagine the world owes me a living, when in fact it owes me nothing?

The Megillah reminds us *le’havi et sefer ha-zikhronot*, to reread our individual Books of Memories. What each of us finds there must remain his own private secret. No man has the same *zikhronot* as any other. But upon examining this book of our innermost thoughts and most well

kept secrets, we must then be big enough to recognize that we were small, great enough to acknowledge our pettiness, and bold enough to move on to a new kind of life before God: one in which we will rectify past errors and omissions, improve the moral tone and ethical quality of our lives. We must learn to be grateful for what we have, not complain over what we have not; Express our gratitude to those who deserve it; Be helpful to friend and neighbor, appreciative of associates, and loyal to Torah — the word of God.

Then, when we have done this, our wandering sleep shall return and be sweet unto us and our rest delicious. Then as the school-children told Mordecai, according to the Midrash, *al tira mi-pahad pitom*, our serenity shall not be disturbed reason of fear of sudden terror. Then the Almighty will grant us, as may He now grant us, the blessings of unbroken tranquility, the most precious possession of a mature and moral mind.



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SERENITY, FAITH, AND HAPPINESS

Haman draws the lot, and out comes the date. The thirteenth of Adar, the day fated for hanging, destruction, and tragedy for the Jewish people, and the day that all those plans shockingly turned around. It all happened on the thirteenth of Adar; yet we celebrate Purim on the fourteenth of Adar. The Megillah (9:22) says that this is because these are the days when the Jews rested from their enemies. This is very strange. Most other holidays that we celebrate take place on the day the big event occurred. Pesach is on the 15th of Nissan, when we left Mitzrayim, Shavuot is on the sixth of Sivan, when, according to most commentators, we received the Torah. Why then do we celebrate Purim on the fourteenth day, the day *after* the miraculous event took place?

Rav Avrohom Schorr writes in his *Halekach Vehalivuv* that we specifically celebrate on the fourteenth, the day we rested from our enemies, because “*Avodat yom HaPurim hu lehasig shalva amiti*” the goal of Purim is to attain a sense of true serenity, a sense of inner tranquility and peace. This idea may seem comical considering the way most of us view the holiday of Purim, a day of chaos, drinking, and costumes. Tranquility is not the usual word associated with Purim. Yet there is something about this day, that when

accessed properly, can transport us to that place of true calmness.

What is the secret to serenity? Take for example, a baby sleeping in the arms of its mother. The mother may be in a quiet room, or a bustling supermarket, but as long as the baby is in its mother's arms it feels safe and calm. How do we achieve a sense of true tranquility? The answer is *bitachon*. The feeling that Hashem is carrying us and that we are safe with Him. David Hamelech beautifully writes of *bitachon* in his songs of Tehillim. In Perek 16 (passuk 8), he says “*Shiviti Hashem lnegdi tamid*”, I am always mindful of Hashem's presence. These words, found on many walls of shuls, remind us that Hashem is always watching us and we should act accordingly. Beyond that, Rav Hershel Schachter added in the name of the Baal Shem Tov, that the word “*shiviti*” comes from the word “*hishtavut*”, which means a person who is tempered and moderated. The reason I am able to be “*shiviti*”, composed and tempered throughout all times, is because “*Hashem lnegdi tamid*,” Hashem is always by my side. Whether the times are high or low, Hashem is a constant and I don't need to be frazzled by the different circumstances. It is the ability to let go

and let God in, that brings serenity.

It is this feeling of serenity that brings true simcha. David Hamelech continues in the next passuk, “*Lachen samach libi*”, because I feel this calmness, I feel happy. The midrash (*Esther Rabbah* 7:13), explains that Mordechai saw young children leaving school and he asked them to share what they learned in school that day. They each relayed the pesukim they learned which all centered around the theme of faith and Hashem's care for his people. Mordechai then laughed and had great joy. Upon witnessing this entire scene, Haman asked Mordechai why he is so overjoyed, Mordechai explained that it is because he no longer needs to fear Haman's decree. He didn't hear that the decree changed, or that all would work out for him and his people. But he heard that he should have *bitachon* and with that, there is no room for fear, there is just room for simcha.

Purim is the day of serenity, not because all is necessarily calm in our homes on that day, but because when hearing the words of the Megillah, we get a renewed sense of faith that Hashem is taking care of us and there is nothing to worry about. It is this faith that carries us through all situations and brings us to a true sense of joy.

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