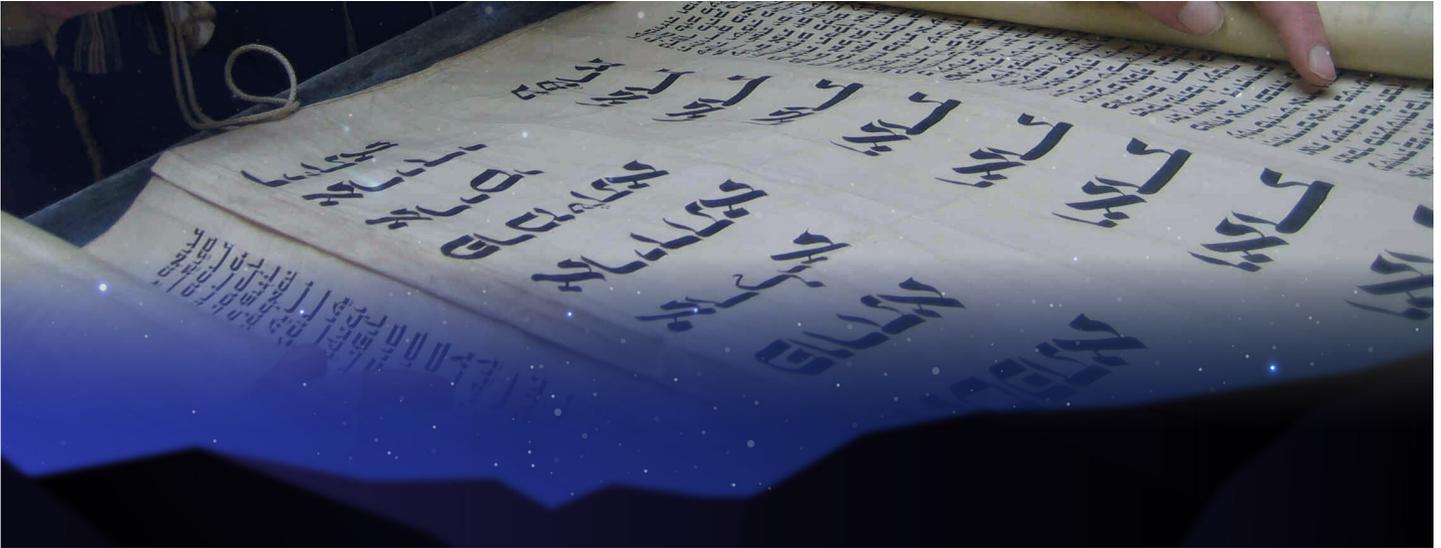


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THE ROYAL INSOMNIA

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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