

Geulas Yisrael 143: Purim

Speaking Hebrew and Restoring Jewish Identity

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A panicked Mordechai was heard shrieking in the streets of Shushan, lamenting the genocidal proclamation against the Jews. Esther, who hadn't heard of the plot, dispatched her trusted servant named Hatach to communicate with Mordechai, who was in no condition to enter the palace precincts.

Since Hatach appears out of nowhere, Chazal claim that he was, in reality, Daniel, the elderly prophet. At this stage, Daniel would have been upwards of 80 or 90 years old, which is why the Ibn Ezra questions this Chazal. It is entirely possible that Chazal didn't intend that Hatach was *actually* Daniel, but meant that Hatach and Esther acted in *the spirit* of Daniel. Whether Chazal meant this association literally or metaphorically, Daniel becomes part of the Purim story.

Not only is Daniel implanted into Shushan, but he launches a charming and tasty Purim custom. There are many intriguing reasons for eating hamentashen or oznei haman on Purim. The Rema in Shulchan Oruch (OC, 695:2) though, provides the primary and most authoritative reason: hamentashen were traditionally made with poppy seed fillings. Eating poppy seed pastries recalls the lentils and seeds which Daniel consumed when he was sequestered in Nevuchadnezar's palace during the first wave of the Jewish exile to Babylonia. Not only does Daniel get a cameo role in the story of Purim, but his menu from 70 years earlier shapes our Purim celebration. Evidently, Daniel's life contains an essential message of Purim.

Declining Jewish Identity

Having all been born into a world without a Mikdash and without full Jewish sovereignty, we have all comfortably constructed our Jewish identity around numerous "other" aspects of Judaism, such as miztvot, ritual, Torah study, chesed, community, minhagim and masorah. For those who lived through that era however, the destruction of the Beit

Hamikdash and the sacking of Yerushalayim were apocalyptic events which wrecked Jewish identity. In dark aftermath of the churban it appeared that Jewish history had ground to a halt. Having been evicted from our land, it appeared that we would gradually vanish or assimilate into the surrounding cultures.

Haman certainly assumed as much. As an astute student of history, he realized that the Jewish people had been selected by Hashem and had enjoyed His protective Hashgacha. Haman ventured that after hundreds of years of betrayal and of religious failure we had forfeited our status as the chosen people, and were now “just like any other nation”, or as he referred to us **מפוזר ומפרד בין העמים** - vulnerable to defeat.

The Jewish future looked bleak, and as a result, Jewish identity began to fray, and Jewish pride began to sink. The clearest signal of the decline of Jewish identity was the deterioration of the Hebrew language. Language shapes our national identity and as Jewish identity began to crumble Hebrew felt outdated and obsolete. Why would anyone speak in a dying language which had belonged to a people who were no longer historically relevant.

The decline of Hebrew is reflected in the language of the two sefarim of Tanach which detail our exile. The sections in Daniel and Ezra which portray our experiences in Babylonia and Persia are each written in complex Aramaic, making them extremely challenging to study. As these sections portray our departure from Yerushalayim and the erosion of Jewish identity it is unsurprising that are written in a foreign language.

Just as unsurprisingly, when Daniel begins to dream of the Messianic era, the language of his sefer shifts back to Hebrew. As he envisions a future in which Jewish history is, once again, relevant, Jewish identity resurges, and Hebrew is revived. Likewise, the sections in Ezra which chronicle our return to Yerushalayim (which occurred after the Purim miracle) are phrased in Hebrew.

Language is a bellwether of identity. When Jewish identity deteriorates Hebrew disappears. When Jewish identity is reinvigorated, Jewish language is restored.

Jewish Persians

The story of Purim occurs toward the tail end of our exile, amidst our struggle to return to Yerushalayim. Koresh, Achashverosh's predecessor had authorized our return, but the project was thwarted by fierce local opposition to Jewish expansionism. As the Purim story unfolded, we were landlocked in Persia without any clear hope for a return to Yerushalayim.

Nothing better reflects the loss of Jewish language than the lack of Jewish names. The name “Mordechai” is a Persian name taken from an ancient Mesopotamian/Babylonian god named Marduk. According to Chazal, Mordechai had alternative Hebrew names such as Petachya, but in Shushan he goes by his Persian-sounding name. The same is true for Esther, which comes from the Persian word “Istarhan” which describes a planet. As “Esther” is a Persian word, the Megillah must translate it by informing us that she also had a Hebrew name – Hadassah. הדסה היא אסתר. Both Mordechai and Esther are referred to by their Persian names, even though they had nice Jewish names. Hebrew appeared to be obsolete, so why bother to use those names?

The names of the months in Megillat Esther further indicate how deeply Persian language penetrated our identity. In this story the Persian names of the months (such as Adar and Nissan) make their debut, replacing the traditional Hebrew nomenclature of chodesh rishon or chodesh shneim asar. Central characters of Purim are referred to by their Persian names, the calendar is Persian, as Jewish identity continues to fade away.

Letter Writing

The most powerful indicator of the decline of Hebrew language are the letters of the Megillah. Letter writing in Persia wasn't just a practical process, but was a culturally iconic procedure. Before the emergence of multi-regional empires, monarchs could dispatch personal messengers to communicate with their citizenry. With the development of a multi-regional empires, which stretched across 127 provinces, letters were

necessary to communicate with subjects in the far reaches of the kingdom.

Because Achashverosh understood the import of letter writing, he refused to rescind his murderous letter. The cancellation of even one royal communique would cast suspicion on the authority of all future letters and would sink his kingdom. When receiving royal letters, subjects who lived too far from Shushan to have ever met the king, would wonder if his letters still carried validity. Achashverosh couldn't allow this.

Because letters were so crucial, the letter writers and letter carriers were skilled writers and were also members of the noble class. The well-known description of **אחשדרנים בני הרמכים** highlights the fact that a person could not become a letter carrier or an **אחשדרן** unless their father was a senior letter official or a **רמך**. Crafting letters and transporting them were new skills which enabled the expansion of the Persian kingdom. Letters in Persia were cultural icons.

One Language is Omitted

As Persian was a multi-cultural and multi-lingual empire, the first two letters of Megillat Esther were translated into every possible language. Every language that is, except for the one language which appeared to have expired, namely Hebrew. Perhaps the lowest point of our exile occurred in the third perek of Megillat Esther when the letter threatening the genocide of Jews was promulgated in every language except the dead language of a historically irrelevant and soon-to be extinct people. At this stage, Jewish identity and pride reached their nadir. Even if we could, somehow, avoid annihilation, the hope of a return to Yerushalayim never seemed more distant.

We rallied. We gathered together to fast, pray and to fight for Jewish survival. Though Hashem's hashgacha wasn't explicit, behind the scenes, He choreographed our redemption. Quickly, everything turned around as we went from victim to hero. Rather than being persecuted, we were lauded by Gentiles and Jewish pride surged. Suddenly, horizons of hope and of future opened wide. Unlike the first letters which weren't translated into Hebrew, the final letter announcing Jewish triumph was translated into Hebrew.

מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה כְּתֻבָּה וְעַם וְעַם כְּלָשְׁנוּ וְאֶל הַיְּהוּדִים כְּתֻבָּם וְכָל־שׁוֹנִם :

As Jewish hope and pride were restored Hebrew language was resuscitated. Unlike Sefer Daniel and Ezra whose galut chronicles were written in Aramaic, the events of Purim in Megillat Esther were recorded in Hebrew. Purim restored Jewish pride and Jewish spirit, and this national energy enabled our final return to Yerushalayim. Purim provided a thrust of national identity to propel us back to Yerushalayim.

Daniel's Stand

Which brings us back to Daniel. 80 years earlier he made a stand. Trapped in the palace and expected to eat royal food, he understood the power of food to shape identity. If he ate Babylonian food and spoke Babylonian, he would become a Babylonian. Daniel courageously defied Nevuchadnezzar's orders, refusing to eat palace food. He conspired with palace guards to smuggle high-protein lentils and seeds thereby avoiding a lobotomy of Jewish identity. As he was the first to make this heroic stand in defense of Jewish identity, he is "invoked" in Megillat Esther and we celebrate his defiance by eating hamenstaschen to recall his bravery.