

Leaving things **TO CHANCE**

How Purim got its name | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

MEGILAS ESTHER, THE BOOK FROM THE HEBREW Bible which we read twice on Purim, tells us in its text that Purim was so called because of the pur – the lot – that was thrown by the wicked Haman in order to determine the date on which he would destroy the Jewish people.¹

Rather than just choose a date on which to kill the Jews, Haman instead held a lottery to decide, a seemingly insignificant detail among all of his considerable planning and scheming to destroy the Jewish people.

Names are important, however, as they define what a thing is. So the name Purim expresses and defines the root of all of the lessons of the day on which we celebrate our salvation from Haman's plans. So, why did our Sages establish the name of the day to be Purim? And, if the name was really about the pur that Haman threw, then the day should have been called Pur (in the singular); so why was it called by the plural of pur, Purim?

CHOICE AND CHANCE

Generally, people try and make choices based on their understanding of things, but some decisions can be very difficult to make, and a person may prefer to leave things over to "chance", flipping a coin to decide. Even the Torah makes use of lotteries at times. For example, the Torah² requires that a lottery be used with the two goats used in the Yom Kippur service to determine which one would be offered to Hashem and which one would be dispatched to the mountain named Azazel. The Torah³ also requires that the land of Israel be divided among the tribes via a lottery.

“ A PERSON MUST NOT YEARN FOR THE PORTION OF ANOTHER PERSON OR FOR THE THINGS THAT ANOTHER PERSON HAS BEEN GIVEN BECAUSE THERE IS A HARMONY THAT EXISTS BETWEEN A PERSON'S ROLE AND THE TRAITS AND THINGS THAT HE HAS BEEN BLESSED WITH TO FULFIL THAT ROLE. ”

So how are we meant to understand this idea of using a lottery to determine something? For the person who believes in G-d, a lottery places the decision entirely in G-d's hands, so to speak, revealing to us His will through its outcome. For someone like Haman, who denied G-d's existence, a lottery simply allows "chance" to decide. Mordechai even called Haman "the grandson of it chanced to happen"⁴. Why such an odd name? Haman was a descendant of the nation of Amalek, which saw firsthand all of the miracles and wonders that took place during the exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea, and at a time when all of the other nations recoiled in fear from the Jewish people, Amalek stood up and fought against us. How could Amalek do this after witnessing all of these miracles and wonders performed by Hashem? The Torah tells us⁵ that Amalek "chanced upon" us "on the way". Amalek saw all the developments and events of the

exodus from Egypt and the splitting of the sea, but they saw in all these things only combinations of chance – chance and more chance – denying the special supervision with which Hashem watches over and conducts the affairs of the Jewish people. And Haman, their heir, was just like them, as Mordechai so accurately described him – "the grandson of it chanced to happen" – he saw in all events only chance because he too denied Hashem's special supervision over the Jewish people.

At the urging of his wife and friends, Haman hastily prepared a gallows on which to hang Mordechai. Unable to wait until morning, Haman then went in the middle of the night to ask the King's permission to hang Mordechai. But that night, Hashem arranged a series of wondrous events to occur that would turn everything on its head: Achashverosh had difficulty sleeping and asked to have the royal chronicles read to him. The royal

chronicles then opened just to the place that told of how Mordechai had once saved the King from the assassination plot of Bigsan and Seresh. Achashverosh realised that nothing had been done to reward Mordechai for his role in saving the King's life. Precisely at that moment, Haman was discovered walking in the King's courtyard, at which point Achashverosh sought Haman's counsel regarding how to honour someone who the King wished to honour. Haman thought the King could only mean him, but, to his horror, he soon learned that the King had in mind his arch enemy, Mordechai.

How did Haman react to this incredible chain of events? "And Haman told Zeresh, his wife, and all his friends what had chanced to happen."⁶ Haman completely turned a blind eye to the hand of Hashem that was smacking him in the face, punishing him for his actions. This is why Mordechai described Haman as "the



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Warm wishes for a Happy Purim

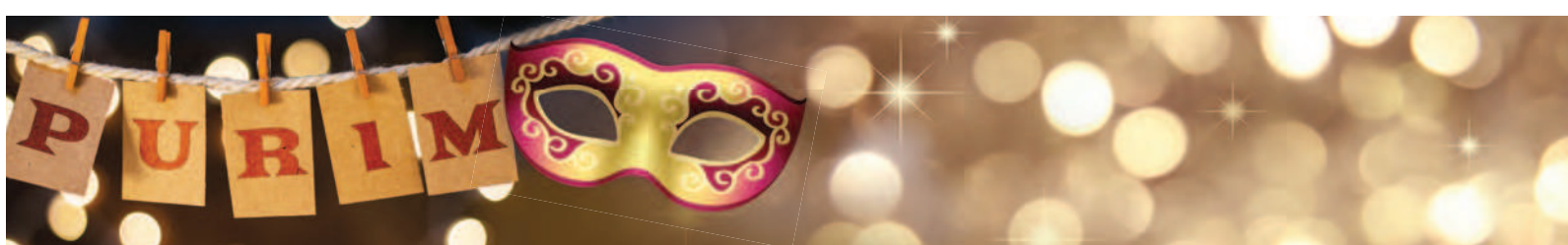
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grandson of it chanced to happen,” because when Haman succeeded, he considered himself lucky, and when he failed, then it was simply bad luck, but there was nothing he could have done differently, as it was a combination of events beyond his control – just a “bad run of luck” as they say, a victim of what had “chanced to happen”.

CHANCE IS DECREED BY HASHEM

If we look closely, however, we see that Mordechai also spoke in terms of chance: “Mordechai told [Hasach, Esther’s servant] all that had chanced to happen.”⁷ And the Torah also speaks in terms of chance! When Eliezer, the servant of Avraham, was sent to choose a wife for Yitzchak, he davened: “...Hashem, my G-d, the G-d of Avraham, please chance to happen before me today...”⁸ And so too, regarding Ruth, it says that, after she returned with her mother-in-law, Naomi, from the fields of Moav: “[Ruth] gleaned in the field after the harvesters and it chanced to happen that it was a parcel of land belonging to Boaz...,”⁹ who was destined to be her redeemer. So, clearly, there appears to be such a thing as “chance” – the Torah even says so!

There are things that fall within the bounds of our choice, and there are things that fall beyond those boundaries. Anything that falls outside the bounds of our

control is called “chance”. But – and this is the key point – even though such things may appear to be only random occurrences, they are actually decreed by Hashem. In other words, such things and events are intended and prepared specifically for us, in accordance with what has been determined to be our unique role in Creation, having nothing whatsoever to do with the quality of our actions, be they meritorious or not. The word “mazel” (ie luck), which is used to describe these things that are out of our control and which have been decreed for us both for good (mazel tov) and bad (mazel rah), actually comes from the Hebrew root “nozel” – to flow – because these things flow down from above (ie, from heaven) and not as some sort of reward for our actions.

This is obviously a complex discussion, as there can be, for example, poverty that is decreed upon a person in terms of his unique role here (ie to cope with such a challenge), but there is also poverty that can occur as a punishment for a person’s actions.

Before a person is created, Hashem fixes that person’s unique role in the world. In

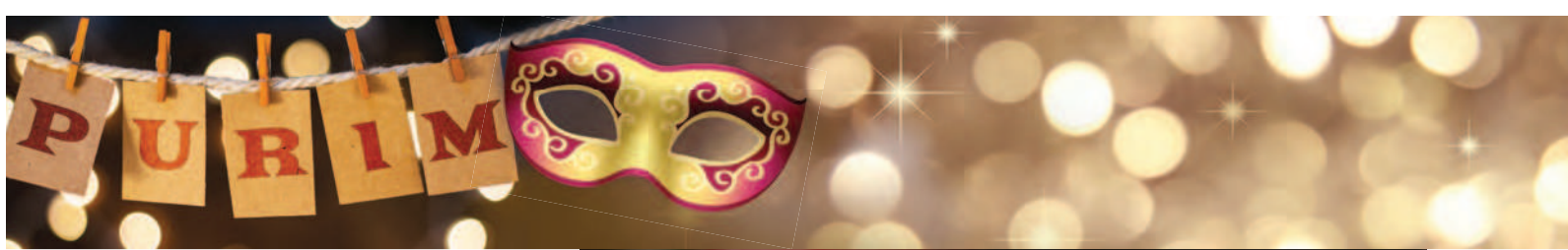
accordance with that role, each person then receives the necessary traits and material objects he will need, and, in light of this, all of the “chance” events that are not in the bounds of his control will be decreed upon him from above – in other words, his mazel. The gemara¹⁰ says: “The angel who is in charge of pregnancy takes the drop (from which the fetus will develop) and stands before Hashem and says: ‘Master of the Universe, What shall be with this drop? Strength or weakness? Wisdom or foolishness? Wealth or poverty?’” And similarly, the gemara¹¹ says: “[Length of] life, children, and sustenance don’t depend on merit, but on mazel.”

We’re taught in Pirkei Avos: “Who is wealthy? Someone who is happy with his portion.” What is a person’s portion? The unique role that has been fixed for him. A man needs to be happy with his role and to recognise that Hashem designated it just for him and for his good, for a good purpose within the entirety of Creation. A person mustn’t yearn for the portion of another person or for the things that another person has been given because there is a harmony that exists between a person’s role and the traits and things that he has been blessed with to fulfil that role. If we have something, we have it for a reason – and vice versa.

LEAVING THINGS TO CHANCE

So when does the Torah leave things to chance? When it came to dividing the land of Israel among the tribes, each and every tribe in general, and each and every member of those tribes in particular, needed to receive the portion that had been designated for them in accordance with their unique roles – not even Moshe was capable of knowing such a thing or deciding what portion each tribe and tribe-member should get. Accordingly,

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the decision had to be left to a lottery, whereby the mazel that had been fixed from the beginning could be left to determine it. So too with the goats on Yom Kippur, only a lottery could distinguish the essence and role of each goat. Eliezer, Avraham's servant, was afraid that his personal bias for his own daughter might influence his choice of a wife for Yitzchak, so he left the choice in the hands of heaven – where the decision of who shall be matched with who is made¹² before the children are even created. Regarding the incident with Ruth, chance, as decreed by Hashem, brought her to her zivug!

ONE LOT BECOMES MANY LOTS

Now we can understand why the name "Purim" was chosen to express the essence of the day. Haman's lottery may have only been one detail in all of the events of the megillah, but it was the detail that entirely encapsulated his atheistic world view. Such a person views events as they unfold in isolation, seeing them as perfectly natural and unconnected: It happens that a king becomes drunk in the middle of a meal; it happens that a king asks to show his wife off to his guests; it happens that a king becomes so angry when his wife doesn't listen to him that he orders her to be killed; and it also happens that a king chooses another woman to be his wife – a woman who is unknown to everyone and conceals her nationality. With each of these events, it's possible to say: this is just a random occurrence – merely chance at work. But, these very same events can be seen entirely differently when viewed from the perspective of one who doesn't believe in random chance and instead chooses to believe in G-d. From such a perspective, the development of these events is a wondrous orchestration from heaven – like a masterful symphony being played, with not a single extraneous note – completely hidden within the seemingly natural unfolding of things.

For Haman, casting lots was merely a way of improving his chances of success, an attempt to manipulate and steer things



in line with the outcome he desired. Rather than just choose the date himself, Haman wanted to try and harness the power of chance and fix things so that luck would accord with his plans. But there are two sides to every pur, like two sides to a coin that gets tossed. On the one side was the pur that Haman chose as an expression of his will, but on the other side was our pur, the expression of Hashem's will that had been decreed. Haman could see only his side of the pur, when event after event showed that there were purim – lots plural – being cast, for all of those events, as well as for each Jew individually and the Jewish people collectively. Haman failed to see that it wasn't just his luck that would be influenced the pur, but ours – making his pur, our purim.

Hashem was watching over us from the beginning – from before Haman's wheels began spinning – ensuring that all of Haman's actions would lead to one end: the pur (lot) of Haman was exchanged for our purim (lots), with the result being that Haman and his plans became a conduit via which the decrees of Heaven were carried out. Haman's advice to kill Vashti, in the end, wound up harming him, as Esther took her place and engineered his downfall. The gallows that Haman prepared to hang Mordechai on, in the end, were used to carry out Haman's own death sentence. The advice that Haman gave the King to honour

himself, in the end, was used to honour Mordechai. As the megillah later notes, Haman's lot fell out on a day that, from the beginning, was destined for our success: "On the day that the enemies of the Jews expected to rule over them, it was just the opposite, the Jews ruled over their enemies."¹³

We can learn a fundamental lesson: on the one hand, there are heavenly decrees that are beyond our control – and, on the other hand, we have the ability to make choices. There is no contradiction in this. Hashem foresees what we will choose and can even bring about a particular result because He knows what our choice will be in any given situation. As we see with Haman, our choices, like it or not, wind up fulfilling Hashem's will and sanctifying His name either willingly or unwillingly. **IL**

Based on a sicha from the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz"l

¹See Esther 3:7, 9:26

²Vayikra 16:8

³Bamidbar 33:54

⁴See Esther Rabah 8:5

⁵Devarim 25:17

⁶Esther 6:13

⁷Esther 4:7

⁸Bereishis 24:12

⁹Ruth 2:3

¹⁰Niddah 16b

¹¹Moed Katan 28a

¹²See Sotah 2a

¹³Esther 9:1