



PURIM

STRONGER together



Achieving unity
in the face of
adversity

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN

EACH FESTIVAL AND ITS ASSOCIATED MITZVOS are not only a remembrance of the events that took place in our history, but serve to strengthen and renew, in our days, the special spiritual influences which we mer-

ited at those times. Our Sages enacted four mitzvot for us on Purim: (1) reading the megilla, (2) celebrating with a festive meal, aka a seudah, (3) sending gifts of food to a friend, aka *mishloach manos*, and

(4) giving to the poor, aka *matanos l'evyanim*. Why did they choose these particular mitzvot and how do these mitzvot serve to channel the spiritual influences of those times for us today?

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PURIM

READING THE MEGILLA

The reading of the megilla teaches us about the wondrous divine providence that occurred at a time when Hashem's presence in the world was greatly hidden – so hidden, in fact, that the megilla does not even make a single mention of Hashem's name throughout its ten chapters! Instead, Hashem's presence is only hinted to, with our Sages teaching that every time the word *hamelech* (the king) appears in the absence of the name Achashverosh, it can either refer to Achashverosh or, *l'havdil*, to Hashem – the King of Kings.¹ Until this very day, the Hebrew month of Adar, in which Purim falls out, remains a time of special providence from Hashem. The gemara⁴ teaches² that the days of the month of Adar are days of success and that, when Adar enters, we increase our *simcha* (joy). A person involved in any litigation is advised to have his court case decided in the month of Adar because of the special mazel of this month. We have the ability to tap into this special providence by recognising that, just as Hashem was running the show then, so too He is today, however much it may appear to the contrary.

HAVING A FESTIVE MEAL

Our Sages established the festive meal that we have on Purim as a *tikun* (a re-

“HAMAN WAS SAYING TO ACHASHVEROSH, ‘NOW IS OUR CHANCE! HASHEM ISN’T GUARDING HIS PEOPLE! LET’S DESTROY THEM!’”

pair) for the sin that took place at that time, when the Jews attended and benefited from Achashverosh's feast despite Mordechai's instructing them³ that they should not attend. By having a feast for the purposes of fulfilling a mitzvah commanded by our Sages, we repair the damage that was done then.

UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER MITZVOS

We need to understand the reasons for the two additional mitzvos that were added to this day: sending gifts of food to a friend and giving to the poor. What is their purpose and special connection to the days of Purim and how, as a result of fulfilling them, do we renew the spiritual influences of those days? We might think that, since the days of Purim and Shushan Purim are meant to be days of joy, that the aim of these mitzvos must be to increase our joy on these days. If that's the reason, however, it would seem fit to enact these same mitzvos on the Torah festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, and Succot), on which we have

a special mitzvah from the Torah of rejoicing. Yet, we don't find that our Sages enacted such things by the other festivals. So, we need to understand what the connection is between the events of Purim and these mitzvos and how they connect what happened on those long ago days to today.

HAMAN'S SLANDER

The gemara tells us, “There was never known a speaker of *loshen horah* (slander) as skilful as Haman.” When a person speaks *loshen horah*, the things he says are true (as opposed to *motzei sheim rah*, for example, where what the person says is a lie). And yet the slander that Haman said⁵ to King Achashverosh seems almost innocuous: “There is one nation (in Hebrew: *am echad*), scattered and dispersed among the nations, in all the nations of your kingdom.” The megilla tells us that Achashverosh ruled over a vast empire comprised of 127 nations. If the Jewish nation was united and existed as an independent nation apart from all of these many other nations, then we would have been an additional nation that Achashverosh would have needed to conquer and rule over. Since the Jewish nation was “scattered and dispersed among the nations”, however, Achashverosh could easily rule over us. So, what exactly was the slander that was spoken by Haman to Achashverosh?

CAREFULLY CONSIDERING HAMAN'S WORDS

If we look closely at Haman's words, we'll see that there is a redundancy contained in them that hints to what he was really getting at. Haman said, “There is an *am echad* (one nation)” – and he adds afterwards “scattered and dispersed among



the nations.” The word *echad*, which means “one”, naturally implies that there is a unity that exists. If the Jewish nation is “scattered and dispersed”, then clearly we are not unified – we are not an “am *echad*” (one nation). It’s as if Haman was saying, “There is a united nation that is not united”, or, “There is a single nation that is not single”. He should have just said, “There is a nation scattered and dispersed among the nations” and left it at that. Why did Haman need to mention the word *echad* at all?

Our Sages explain⁶ that when Haman mentioned the word *echad*, he wasn’t using it as an adjective for the Jewish nation at all, but was instead referring to Hashem, as we say in the shema, “Hashem is one”. Rather than reading the verse to say that, “There is an am *echad*,” our Sages instead rearrange the words a bit, relying on an alternative meaning for one of the words, to tease out what

Haman was really saying to Achashverosh: “*Echad* (ie. Hashem) is asleep⁷. [His] nation is scattered and dispersed.” When the Jewish people are united, we are protected by Hashem, but when we are scattered and dispersed, this causes us to be distant from Hashem and, as a consequence, we lack His protection.

Haman didn’t just tell Achashverosh that the Jewish people were “scattered and dispersed among the nations”, rather he proceeded to add and to emphasise in the same breath that we were, “in all the nations of your kingdom”. Each nation of the world is unique in its outlook and, accordingly, in how it opposes the ways of Hashem. Haman was noting that by being left among the nations, the Jewish people were being influenced by them and that these foreign influences that we were absorbing served further to weaken and to separate us, eliminating any chance of our becoming unified.

Haman understood that if the Jewish nation was “scattered and dispersed” then this was the time when we were the most vulnerable, making it ripe for bringing about our destruction, *chas v’shalom*. And herein lies the slander: recognising and pointing out the present vulnerability of the Jewish people and how it reflected on our weakened relationship with Hashem was the greatest accusation that Haman could make against us. Haman was saying to Achashverosh, “Now is our chance! Hashem isn’t guarding His people! Let’s destroy them!”

SLEEPING ON THE JOB

So, what does it mean to say that Hashem is “sleeping”? This refers to the period that our Sages call *hester panim* (the hiding of Hashem’s face), when Hashem appears to be distant from His people and, as a result, we appear fit to be de-

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stroyed. And the word *echad* is actually what shows this. Hashem was asleep to His nation because we were not *echad* – because we lacked unity. Our Sages explain⁸ that, just as we don tefillin, Hashem also “dons” tefillin. While our tefillin contain inside them a parchment with the verse, “Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is one”, Hashem’s “tefillin” contain inside them the verse, “Who is like Your people Israel, one nation on earth”. Just as we testify to the uniqueness of Hashem, to His singularity in the world, so too Hashem testifies to our uniqueness, to our singularity in the world. We testify to His being one; He testifies to our being one. The purpose of the Jewish nation is to publicise the greatness – the oneness – of Hashem in His creation and His constant, on-going providence. When the Jewish people are not united, however, we cannot fulfil our purpose and, when we fail to fulfil our purpose, Hashem’s presence – His uniqueness, His oneness within creation – becomes obscured from the world, hence the “hiding” of His “face”.

What stands in the way of our being united? For one thing, our desires. We are each drawn to different things – and often such things can place us in direct opposition to each other, especially where there are limited resources. When we chase after our desires, we separate from each other, creating distance between us. The will of one person is not like the will of another person and the will of a person may even serve as a hindrance to the will of another person. Where we can and need to become united is via serving Hashem. When everyone aims and aspires towards this single goal, we put aside our individual desires and our petty differences, working together and sanctifying Hashem’s name in the world.

SO WHERE DID HAMAN GO WRONG?

The truth of the matter, however, was that Hashem was not really “sleeping”.

In fact, in their explanation of what Haman was really saying to Achashverosh, our Sages also include Hashem’s response to Haman’s accusation that He was asleep: “There is no sleep for Me, as it says, ‘Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.’”⁹ You say that I am asleep! As you live, I will awaken [from this appearance of sleep] and destroy you from the world”. It’s worth pointing out that part of the mechanism by which Hashem eventually brought about our salvation was, not coincidentally, via King Achashverosh having difficulty sleeping one night – which in turn set off the chain of events that ultimately resulted in Haman being hanged upon his own gallows!

Although Haman’s accusations against us were indeed true, his efforts to destroy us wound up achieving the exact opposite of his aim – ultimately causing the entire Jewish nation to become united as a result of the very decrees that he counselled Achashverosh to issue. Just as Haman failed to realise that Hashem wasn’t really “sleeping”, he also failed to account for Esther and the impact that she would have on behalf of her people. Esther saw clearly the weak point where Haman had focused his efforts and immediately sought to repair it. She instructed Mordechai to “go assemble all of the Jews”, so as to unite us behind Mordechai, the *gadol hador* (the leader of the generation) in the service of Hashem, fasting, and davening. And who better to learn from than Mordechai what it means to serve Hashem with *mesiras nefesh* (a willingness to sacrifice even one’s own life in the service of his Creator), when our very lives were on the line?

And so, the megilla testifies to the incredible unity that was achieved at that time in a similar fashion to how Hashem described the special unity that transpired when the Torah was initially given to us – by using plural subjects along with singular verbs to draw attention to this. For example, when we gathered to receive the Torah, it says¹⁰, “And

UNITING THROUGH GIFTS OF FOOD: another reason for the mitzvah of mishloach manos

Our Sages bring another reason for why the mitzvah of sending gifts of food to a friend was enacted. The gemara asksⁱ what the Jewish people had done to be worthy of destruction? One of the answers given is that the people had bowed down to an idol during the reign of the wicked Nevuchadnetzer, who was responsible for destroying the First Temple. The gemara answers, however, that just as the Jews only pretended to serve that idol, so too Hashem only “appeared” to decree their destruction by Haman.

Our Sages noteⁱⁱ that, as a result of this bowing to the idol, the Jews of that generation refrained from eating meat and drinking wine in each other’s homes because each one, consequently, suspected his fellow of being an apostate. Each one knew regarding his own behaviour that the acknowledgment of the idol had only been a superficial one – an exterior act completely devoid of feeling – but no one knew what was really going on in the heart of his neighbour, and each worried that, perhaps, his neighbour had bowed to the idol wholeheartedly and, as a result, it was forbidden to eat and drink in such a person’s home.

After everyone witnessed the miracle of Purim, however, they now understood that they all had been perfectly faithful in their hearts to Hashem and to His Torah, and it was permitted for them to eat by their neighbours. What better way to unite them than to establish the mitzvah of mishloach manos, requiring the sending of gifts of prepared (ie. cooked and not raw) foods to their neighbours? Where once food had served to separate them, now food would serve to unite them!

ⁱMegilla 12a

ⁱⁱSee Iturei Torah citing the Chasam Sofer and Rebbe Meir Yechiel of Ostrovtza

“ JUST AS WE TESTIFY TO THE UNIQUENESS OF HASHEM, TO HIS SINGULARITY IN THE WORLD, SO TOO HASHEM TESTIFIES TO OUR UNIQUENESS, TO OUR SINGULARITY IN THE WORLD. WE TESTIFY TO HIS BEING ONE; HE TESTIFIES TO OUR BEING ONE.”

they (plural), Israel, encamped (singular) there opposite the mountain,” and Rashi comments so as to explain the grammatical peculiarity, “*K’ish echad b’leiv echad*”, (like one man with one heart). So too, not once, but twice the megilla notes¹¹ in the singular that the Jews “accepted upon themselves” – referring to their re-dedicated efforts at that time to accept and to keep the Torah, both for themselves and for future generations to come. As was the case when the Torah was originally given to us, our re-acceptance of it reflected the fact that we did so together as a single unit, completely and utterly united, and through this unity we merited special protection from Hashem – a miracle – which resulted in overturning the slanderous accusations of the wicked Haman.

MITZVOS TO HELP US TAP INTO THE UNITY THAT EXISTED AT THAT TIME

Recognising the need for us to strengthen our unity for future generations, our Sages chose to enact mitzvot – sending gifts of food to a friend and giving to the poor – that would, through their fulfilment, tap into the spiritual legacy of the unity that we achieved at that time and seek to renew and give added strength to that spiritual influence for us each and every year. Accordingly, the purpose of the mitzvah of sending gifts of food to a friend is to create, between the giver and the receiver, feelings of love and brotherhood. So too, the purpose of giving to the poor is to cause each of us to feel himself responsible for his fellow, and as a result of this, help us

to eradicate our individual wills and desires. Beyond the purpose expressed earlier, the festive meal that we have on Purim also serves to unite us, so that we may rejoice together and recall a time when we came together to serve Hashem and rededicate ourselves to doing His will “like one man with one heart”. Freilichen Purim! **IL**

Adapted from a sicha by the Sifsei Chaim, Rabbi Chaim Friedlander, ztz”l.

¹See Esther Rabbah 3:10.

²Taanis 29a.

³Michtav M’Eliyahu – Michtav B’davar Emunas Chachamim citing the Midrash.

⁴Megilla 13b.

⁵Esther 3:5.

⁶Esther Rabbah 7:12.

⁷The Hebrew **יש** could be translated as “There is...” or, alternatively, as “sleep”.

⁸Brachos 6a.

⁹Tehillim 121:4.

¹⁰Shemos 19:2.

¹¹See Esther 9:23 and 27.

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