

Megillas Esther & Purim

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Written by a student

Love of God: Amalek & Megilla

After reciting the Shema's first verse, "Listen Israel, God is our God, God is one", we state, "And it shall be that these matters that I command you today will be placed on your heart" (Deut. 6:6). This is the only method to attain love of God [i.e., Torah study]. All other methods are idolatry. Rashi says, "Through this you will recognize Who spoke and brought the world into existence."

Muslims might not be idolaters in a halachic sense, but they certainly are idolaters philosophically, as they do not recognize the "One Who spoke and brought the world into existence." One who is haughty before God is like idolatry itself—"man is considered an altar."

Judaism is in direct opposition to the deification of man, which can take place on different levels. Adolf Hitler, may his name be erased, believed he was divinely ordained. Accepting a higher power [God] does not necessarily preclude haughtiness. Such personalities identify with a super force, but what they seek is their own omnipotence. The greatest evil doers—the church for example—accepted a higher force, but were the most evil of people and were egomaniacs as well. They identified with a higher force and thereby deified themselves, as Maimonides says, "He himself is an idol."

Judaism holds that we have no concept of God and we can approach Him only through wisdom and the Torah, which lead to humility. But the forces other religions believe to be under is nothing other than a projection of their own haughtiness. This is pure idolatry and is in direct opposition to Judaism.

Amalek is this expression of the deification of man. Amalek expresses man's inability to accept his insignifi-

cant status in reality—ultimately in terms of God. Amalek is self-deification and is against Maimonides' description of a "lowly and dark creation" (Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah 2:2). Haman embodies the Amalekite philosophy:

And Haman saw that Mordechai would not kneel or bow low to him, and Haman was filled with rage (Megillat Esther 3:5).

Haman saw that the Jews' philosophy rejects the deification of man, and that is what destroyed him. The mark of the Jew is that regardless of what man views as important, it is all nonsense. Amalek is the exact opposite. "For the hand upon the throne of the Lord: the Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages" (Exod. 17:16). Chazal say that God's throne [reign] is not complete until Amalek is annihilated—deification of man obscures the recognition of God.

The Megilla has some difficult verses. When Mordechai learned of Haman's plot against the Jews, he wore sackcloth and ashes. Why did Esther send Mordechai a change of garments? Afterward, Esther inquired as to why Mordechai wore sackcloth and what had transpired. The order appears wrong: Esther should have first inquired about the events before sending Mordechai the change of garments. The verse says, "And Mordecai told Hasach all that had happened to him" (Esther 4:7). The word for "happened" is karahu. Chazal comment on the verse:

Mordechai said to Esther (via Hasach), "The son of karabu is causing the problem."

Karahu is a reference to Amalek, who the Torah says "karcha baderech; approached you on the way" (Deut. 25:18). Mordechai was conveying to Esther that Haman the Amalekite was at the root of the Jews' tragic situation.

We can then interpret events as follows: Esther saw Mordechai wearing sackcloth and ashes and thereby understood there to be a political difficulty. Her sending the change of clothing meant to say, "I have political power, but you, Mordechai, cease from making a public demonstration and I will take care of the problem." Mordechai replied, "This is the son of karabu," meaning, some political difficulties can be worked out, but not those regarding Amalek. Amalek does not tolerate the Jews' philosophy, that being, what we know of God is very limited and unclear, and man is insignificant. Amalek deifies man and hates the Jew. Therefore, Esther understood that diplomacy would not work with Amalek, whose energies are intent on destroying Israel. The only salvation is through God's providence.

Even though the lot was cast to annihilate the Jews twelve months later, Mordechai urged Esther to go before the king the very next day. Esther wanted to wait as she felt she had time, but Mordechai said:

If you wait, you will imply that you can live with this tragic fate and the king will destroy the Jews and then appease you later. Esther, you must show you cannot live with the situation for even one moment, and that you would risk your life by entering the inner courtyard without being summoned (Esther 4:11) in order to avert this fate.

This would convey to the king that there was no way to appease Esther. This situation of Amalek (Haman) demanded desperate measures.

King Achashverosh made an elaborate one hundred eighty-day feast; he was quite ostentatious. But his ego was different from Haman's, a man who was an inherent egomaniac. But since King Achashverosh had wealth and power, he derived no satisfaction from either without showing it off to others.

Wealth and power are not inherent human needs. King Achashverosh's haughtiness was relative to others. But that was not an inherent religion of human deification, which Haman embodied.

And who knows if such a time as this you attained royal status (Esther 4:14).

Chazal say that Mordechai recognized that this might be divine providence. Rashi says it is audacious to suggest that something might or might not be divine providence. Therefore, Rashi goes out of his way to interpret this verse differently, *"And who knows if you will have this opportunity again."*

We must appreciate Esther's sacrifice. While she was coerced to be Achashverosh's wife, *"She rose from his bosom (from sleeping with the king) and went back to the bosom of Mordechai,"* who was her husband. But once she willfully took it upon herself to approach the king without coercion to reverse the decree, her willful intimacy with the king now sacrificed her relationship with Mordechai, *"And what I have lost, is lost"* (Esther 14:16). ■

Megilla: Fundamentals in Action

According to Tosfos, why do laws pertaining to mezuzah include the requirement of Sirtut—scoring parchment at the baseline of the verses? The reason given is that mezuzah is referred to as *"the truth of Torah"* (*"Amitus shel Torah"*). What does this mean?

Mezuzah teaches about Torah itself. It is a Torah component placed on the house. But the entire Torah is from Sinai. So what is the concept behind

mezuzah, that we must isolate and highlight two Torah paragraphs?

Tosfos teaches a fundamental principle: all parts of the Torah are not of equal importance. Torah has an essence, primarily, the first two chapters of the Shema Yisrael. What is this essence? It is Unity of God. *"Hear Israel; God is our God, God is one."* The mitzvah of mezuzah is to highlight the primary Torah concepts. These concepts also include Knowledge of God, Love of God, Torah Study, and Reward and Punishment. The Chinuch says that if a person is missing the mitzvah of Unity of God [1], he has nothing (although keeping all other mitzvahs). In mitzvah 417, the Chinuch states:

If one transgresses Unity of God, and doesn't believe in His unity, blessed be He...he loses this command, and all other commands of the Torah. For all other commands depend on this one.

So we see from Tosfos that all commands are not equal.

This is why mezuzah requires Sirtut. Mezuzah alone is the isolation of the essence of Torah. Sirtut is an emphasis of that text, of those fundamentals. When these two paragraphs are located in the Torah, they form part of a greater whole. But when separated in mezuzah, and thereby distinguished, those paragraphs must be scored, "underlining" as it were, the principles found therein. But what is the relationship between mezuzah and Megilla, that Megilla also requires scoring, Sirtut?

The answer is based on a Talmudic portion (Megilla 19a). The Talmud asks what Mordechai saw that he didn't bow to Haman. Mordechai sensed in the person of Haman that he deemed himself immortal and omniscient. Haman's whole inner evaluation was idolatrous. Had Mordechai bowed to Haman, he would have consented to Haman's idolatrous self image. The act of bowing per se is acceptable, as we

see Jacob bowed to Esav. But in this bowing, Mordechai would philosophically defy God's unity. Mordechai therefore held that in Haman's case, one must sacrifice his own life. Once Haman represented himself as omniscient, bowing to Haman denied God's exclusive role, and must be avoided at all costs. So although halachically Mordechai could have bowed to Haman, this bowing crossed the line of God's Unity. As such, halachic permission no longer mattered, and [Torah] philosophy dictated his need to reject Haman's decree. We thereby learn that Megilla embodies the concept of God's Unity. Mordechai understood this concept, and its philosophy, and demonstrated that violation is not option. One must sacrifice his life to endorse the gravity of sin in idolatry. One must give his life to uphold the truth of all truths: God alone is the cause of all. And this dedication clearly illustrates the next fundamental: Love of God.

Also in Megilla are examples of man using wisdom—chochma. It is insufficient that the Torah's wisdom is limited to man's act of study. But man must also extrapolate this wisdom and apply it to his Derech haChaim—his style of life. Mordechai and Esther both embodied the application of Torah wisdom.

And we also see in Megilla the principle of Reward and Punishment: Haman was punished. However, this principle when found in the Torah is dealing with God delivering the punishments, unlike Megilla, when man seems to be the cause. The parallel is lacking. So where is the parallel... where are God's miracles [clear displays] of Reward and Punishment, so that Megilla parallels the Reward and Punishment of the Torah? The story of the Megilla appears to unveil the great cunning of Mordechai and Esther, but wherein are the miracles?

The answer is as follows. Mordechai and Esther used wisdom. However, many unexpected factors occur in our daily lives and derail the best laid plans. The miracle here, was that nothing interfered with Mordechai and Esther's plans. All the downfalls and successes in the Megilla occurred because God made certain that any potential human interference was held at bay. Nothing was allowed to interfere. Now the Megilla's rewards and punishments exactly parallel the reward and punishment of the Shema, of the Torah's "V'haya im shamoah" where God promises rain in a providential time.

The Megilla thereby mirrors the most primary Torah fundamentals. And just as mezuzah's laws require the underlining of the texts to indicate the primary nature of its content, Megilla too has this requirement, to convey that it too shares the character with mezuzah: a text of fundamentals.

The Megilla includes the words "Kimu v'kiblu", which means the Jews re-accepted the Torah once again. But this time—unlike Sinai—there was no coercion of the event's "amazement." Here during Purim, the Jews re-accepted the Torah lifestyle out of a love of the fundamentals. They saw how two people using Torah wisdom were successful in averting catastrophe. They appreciated what Mordechai defended: God's Unity. They realized God's providence was essential in the unhampered success of Mordechai and Esther, as they engaged Torah wisdom in their daily lives. This highlight of "Kimu v'kiblu" attests again to the Megilla's core theme: embodying the Torah's fundamentals, just like mezuzah. The Jews were attracted to those Torah fundamentals expressed in the Purim story. Their re-acceptance of Torah was due to those fundamentals. ■

1. Unity of God refers to the conviction that there is One cause for all that exists.

Rationally Guided Emotions

Performing mitzvos has value, provided they are not performed on an emotional plane. Emotions can get a person into trouble. If one is merciful when he should not be, he is acting incorrectly. Had Esther been merciful to Haman when he was begging her for his life, it would have resulted in the worst catastrophe.

Shame, mercy and kindness are all emotions, but Chazal deemed them worthy of being followed. One should not use these emotions to guide his life under all circumstances, like Esther who would not be merciful to Haman when he begged her for his life. ■

Modesty

A woman was given that perfection of representing that idea of modesty. Historically, it was not necessarily given to a woman per se. Sometimes, a woman will need to act out the role of the man. Esther originally rejected going before the king. But the situation demanded she do so. Therefore, she engineered a plan to save the Jewish people. Therefore, she switched roles. Devorah too switched roles. Only in certain situations a woman must take on the man's role. It is not called Megillas Mordecai, but Megillas Esther. But on the whole, man leaves the tent [home] more than a woman because his nature is more in line with accomplishment, and a woman's nature is less inclined this way. That is why she usually does not leave that state of perfection. But it is absolutely absurd to suggest that Judaism views a woman as inferior. ■

Perfection is Within

Purim brought the Jews to a higher level than the giving of the Torah. This is because the miracle of Purim was really not a revealed miracle. It was the operation and the natural function of God's providence. Klal Yisrael saw that because Mordechai and Esther lived properly they deserved providence and the Jews recognized that was the proper lifestyle. Esther 9:7 says the Jews "*rose up and accepted...*" [The rabbis comment that this means that the Jews once again accepted the Torah, but this time it was out of love, whereas at Sinai the Jews accepted the Torah out of coercion, as the midrash says, "*God held Sinai over their heads and said, 'Accept the Torah, or here you will be buried.'*"] The Jews' re-acceptance of Torah out of love during Mordechai and Esther's era teaches that one can only rise to a higher level if it is achieved through oneself. But if one is affected by externals, even the greatest miracles do not change a person, and the moment the effects are gone, it's lost [one returns to his former state]. ■

Purim: The Jew & Wisdom

In Megillat Esther there is a strange phenomenon: When King Achashverosh brought out the vessels of the Beis Hamikdash, he said:

Seventy years has transpired and God has not fulfilled His promise to redeem the Jews. Now there won't be any repercussions if I use the vessels of the Beis Hamikdash.

King Achashverosh also wore the high priest's garments. The reason he did these things was because he was obsessed with the Jew. Haman too was obsessed with the Jew, as we see he was elated that the lot [to annihilate the Jews] fell during the month of Adar. Haman said, "*The lottery fell during the month of Moshe's death!*" [He felt that this was a fortuitous sign.] And when Haman's plot failed, his wife and family said to Haman, "*If Mordechai is from Jewish lineage, you will surely fail.*" The verses reveal that both King Achashverosh and Haman were obsessed with the Jew and with the Torah's ideas. The same is true of the person who deteriorates—he is bothered by the system of Judaism. But why does it bother him?

Even though the soul can make a choice and reject the world of ideas, it cannot remove itself completely from that world. The soul always retains a recognition of the world of wisdom and it is disturbed by it [when it's not following it]. The evil person then attempts to overcome that disturbance: [King Achashverosh used the vessels of the Beis Hamikdash and the high priest's garments, and Haman's wife told him that Mordechai's Jewish lineage forecasts failure. And Rashi says the evil person will prevent others from performing mitzvos and he will despise the sages.] King Achashverosh, Haman, and the evil person all recognized that there is truth to the world of wisdom. [Thus, these acts were attempts to deny what they sensed was true.]

King Achashverosh had great respect for the wise men of Israel. For when Queen Vashti sinned against King Achashverosh, he called the Jewish sages for advice. The gemara says (Megilla 12b) that these were the Sanhedrin. King Achashverosh asked them, "*What shall I do about Vashti?*" The Jewish sages discussed among themselves as follows:

"This is a bad predicament. If we tell the king to kill his wife, tomorrow his wine will wear off and he will be angry with us. But if we tell him to leave her alone, he will hate us because we would not be acting in the king's honor." The sages gave a political answer: "Good wine is preserved well in its own cask for many years. But if you pour the wine from cask to cask, it loses its flavor. We are a nation that was poured from one place to another. We are not the right ones to ask. Ask Ammon and Moab, for they have been in the same place all these years."

Thus, King Achashverosh recognized the Jewish sages. The obsession with the Jew is an attempt to overcome the conflict he created by his free choice. The choice to follow the emotions is only one part of man. But the soul remains disturbed and unhappy and the person tries to wipe out that other part that recognizes the truth.

Although those like King Achashverosh and Haman do not follow the world of wisdom, their souls cannot become completely involved in their selfish and physical lifestyles. [The soul remains tied to wisdom and is not converted to a physical and emotional condition. Therefore, these personalities needed to respond to the vessels of the Beis Hamikdash, to the high priest's garments and to Mordechai's lineage.] These were attempts at denying the reality of the Jewish nation. Using these sacred objects in mundane ways would reject their significance.

When one chooses the world of wisdom, the soul is being true to its nature. And when one chooses the physical lifestyle the soul violates its nature. Thus, part of the soul will always fight against itself. "*The wicked are as turbulent as the sea*" (Isaiah 57:20). This represents the conflict of the evil person. He is turbulent because there is a part of himself—the soul, which

knows that the world of ideas is the real world—that he cannot appease. This also explains Rashi on Bechukosai, on why the evil person must hate those who represent the Torah: [seeing] the righteous person creates conflict within the evil person and the evil person must reject the righteous person.

If one makes the wrong first step, it is the essence of his error. If he fails to learn and pursue wisdom, he then deteriorates and all the following stages [as Rashi states] depict his attempt to overcome His conflicts that stem from an underlying recognition of the truth. ■

Providence & the Unconscious

There is a dispute concerning from where one starts reading Megillas Esther. One opinion says it is from the verse "*That night, sleep deserted the king...*" for this is where the miracle began. But what do these words mean? One commentator explains as follows:

Why couldn't the king sleep? In his dream he saw Haman take a sword to kill him, and this fright awakened him.

And what happened once he awoke? Haman was in the courtyard. [The precise timing of these two interrelated and dependent events indicate God's providence at work.] This association of the king's nightmare and Haman's presence can change the entire way the kingship plays out. In Achashverosh's mind, this association can drastically change his actions. Chazal interpret this incident as "*Streams of water is the heart of the king in the Lord's hand; He directs it wherever he desires*" (Prov. 21:1). God's providence works through

man's unconscious. And this applies to anybody, not just to a king.

Another explanation is as the gemara says:

Something occurred to the king. He said, "Why did Esther invite Haman to the wine fest? Maybe they both conspire to murder me. Is there no one around who is loyal to me, who can reveal to me if a conspiracy is afoot? Maybe I owe someone a favor?"

A king must be careful to repay his loyal subjects to retain that loyalty. That is why he immediately summoned Sefer Zichronos, the Book of Remembrances. He found that Mordechai was loyal in informing him on Bigsan's and Seresh's plot to kill him. But his loyalty went unrecognized. Without rewarding Mordechai, the king would demonstrate that loyalty is purposeless. Achashverosh immediately changed course and followed through by honoring Mordechai. Esther's plan worked: her wine fest intended to arouse the king's suspicion against Haman. [It worked, for God synchronized the events to compliment her plan.]

According to Rabbeinu Yona, "*Be careful of factions*" (Avos 2:3) means that when one in power bestows good upon another, that good should not be attributed to the person because people are selfish by nature. Therefore, one must view the good as very possibly emanating from God. Since people are typically selfish, and the good one does for another should be viewed with this understanding. Thereby, one must realize God can intervene. Nonetheless, we must show recognition for the good that people bestow upon us.

In an unbelievable insight and a lesson about God's providence, Chazal recognized the unconscious forces of the mind and how they could dramatically change events.

According to Maimonides, this mishna addresses dependency. Rabbeinu Yona says it concerns philosophy. Chazal dispute whether it was Esther who evoked Achashverosh's change in behavior, or if the king's altered behavior was brought about solely through God's providence relating to his unconscious. But according to either view, the king's reaction was driven by unconscious factors. ■

Perfection & Providence

As wisdom is primary in God's world, one who engages in wisdom is not disturbed by physical considerations, for divine providence is the natural system that overrides the physical world. When one is close to the Source of wisdom, he will not suffer physical mishaps. "*Many evils befall the tzaddik, but God saves him from them all*" (Psalms 34:20). Similarly, miracles assisted the Jews. Miracles are also different from providence, since miracles are the suspension of natural laws, whereas the divine providence assisting one who follows Torah is a natural phenomenon; it is the very design of the universe.

Maimonides says that divine providence usually operates in connection with man's heart. "*That night, sleep deserted the king and he ordered the book of records, the annals, to be brought; and it was read to the king*" (Esther 6:1). [Here, King Achashverosh's heart became God's instrument of divine providence.] Providential actions upon man's "heart" [his thoughts, such as the king's thoughts] are not breaches in natural law [which is an external phenomenon operating in the physical universe. Here, God intervened through

divine providence, affecting the king's thoughts, but not his free will.]

We previously stated that the tzaddik greatly enjoys the little he has versus wealthier people's dissatisfaction with their abundance. We must accept that we cannot fathom what [great] level of pleasure Rabbi Akiva derived from his studies. We enjoy an idea at certain times, but Rabbi Akiva was immersed in a totally different level of wisdom than we are; add to this his many years of that enjoyment. (Chazal say that he died at quite an old age.) The pleasure he experienced was unparalleled. ■