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מועצת הרבנים דשיקגו

Divrei Torah for Purim 5783



Rabbi Yona Reiss
*Don't Give Up
Hope*



Rabbi Yosef Posner
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Freely*

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In This Issue:

Don't Give Up Hope

Rabbi Yona Reiss

..... 1

Feel Free to Act Free Freely

Rabbi Yosef Posner

..... 6



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Don't Give Up Hope

Rabbi Yona Reiss
Av Beth Din



In the song of *Shoshanas Yaakov* that is chanted following the reading of the Megillah, we recite the words להודיע שכל קוויך לא יבושו ולא יכלמו לנצח כל החוסים בך – *that [the miracle of Purim] lets it be known that all who place their hope in Hashem shall not be ashamed or confounded, when they trust in the Almighty.* Rabbi Yerucham Olshin provides a beautiful elucidation of this central theme of the Purim holiday in his *sefer, Yerach L'Moadim* (*ma'amarim*, chapter 52), upon which this essay is largely based.

The Brisker Rav (*Commentary to the Torah, Megillat Esther*) explains that Purim is all about never losing hope. This is evident in the Rambam's explanation (*Sefer Mitzvot HaKatzar*, towards the end) of the rabbinic mitzvah of reading the Megillah on Purim. According to the Rambam, the Rabbis established the obligation of reading the Megillah for the purpose of emphasizing the truth of what is written in the Torah (*Devorim* 4:7) that the Jewish people are unique in that we always enjoy a close relationship with Hashem בכל קראנו אליו – *whenever we*

call out to Him. Thus, after reading the Megillah, we express this theme by stating that those who place their hope in Hashem will never be disappointed.

Rav Olshin notes that there does seem to be a slight difference between the Rambam's formulation and that of the post-Megillah song. In the Rambam's formulation, בכל קראנו אליו is about prayer, while in the song, the words כל החוסים בך appear to be more about a general sense of hope. While the Rambam underscores that we are always able to reach out to Hashem through prayer, in *Shoshanas Yaakov* we are emphasizing more the notion of staying connected through an eternal sense of hope and faith.

The answer, avers Rav Olshin, is that both ideas are really one and the same. Obviously, the forum through which we pour out our hearts to Hashem is prayer. But prayer requires a sense of persistent hope and trust to be effective. The *Gemora* (*Berachos* 32b) cites Rabbi Chama b'rabi Chanina as deriving from the verse (*Tehillim* 27:14) קוה אל ה' חזק – *one should place*

his hope in Hashem and then reinforce that hope yet again – that specifically in the context of Tefillah, one must never give up. Thus, if one's prayers are not answered, one should simply pray yet again. So too, it was through the prayers of Mordechai and Esther and the Jewish people that the salvation of Purim came to fruition.

The *Midrash Shochar Tov* (cited by Rav Olshin in the name of Rav Dovid Cohen, Rosh Yeshiva of Chevron – Knesset Yisroel) similarly interprets the words in *Tehillim* (chapter 22) in the chapter that begins למנצח על אילת השחר, referring to Esther the Queen (see *Yoma* 29a), as highlighting the great faith of Mordechai and Esther, as indicated by the phrase בך בטחו אבותינו – *that our ancestors trusted in Hashem*, and on this basis, according to the Midrash, merited ותפלטמו – *and Hashem rescued them*. The theme of שכל קוֹיךָ לא יבושו is manifestly evident as well, as the wording of this psalm states explicitly בך בטחו ולא בושו – *in You they trusted and were not embarrassed*. The means for meriting this deliverance was unmistakably through prayer as the psalm states, אֵלֶיךָ זָעָקוּ וְנִמְלָטוּ – *they cried out to You and were delivered*.

How was this prayer manifested in the story of the Megillah? The Midrash refers to הצומות וזעקתם (*Esther* 9:31), *the matter of the fasts and the crying out*. The Midrash then

states that the sense of faith was demonstrated through Esther's bold decision to go uninvited into the King's inner chamber, ובכן אבוא אל המלך (*Esther* 4:16), which ultimately led to an outcome that removed any stigma or embarrassment to the Jewish people, as manifested in the verse ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה (*Esther* 8:16) – *the Jews had illumination and joy*. Our prayers during the story of Purim were based on unshakeable faith, even in the face of great danger, since Esther knew, as she conveyed to Mordechai (*Esther* 4:11), that the penalty for coming uninvited into the King's chamber would typically be the death penalty.

I heard from my rebbe, Rav Hershel Schachter *shlit"a*, that indeed the reading of the Megillah itself is a manifestation of prayer. The *Gemora* (*Megillah* 4a) cites R. Yehoshua ben Levi as deriving the mitzvah to read the Megillah both during the nighttime and the daytime from the verse א-לקי אקרא יומם ולא תענה ולילה לי – *My G-d, I call out by day, and You do not reply; and at night I do not remain silent* (22:3) [translation from Chabad.org]. This verse clearly ascribes a type of prayer to the recitation of the Megillah itself. Furthermore, this verse is from the self-same aforementioned psalm that is attributed to Queen Esther.

Indeed, Rabbi Michael Shurkin

(*Harerei Kedem, Moadim, Siman 217*) cites Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik as explaining that the nature of the “prayer” of the Megillah is in the fashion of a “hint” to Hashem that just as He delivered us during the days of Mordechai and Esther, so too we pray for salvation in our days. Rashi states, in explanation of this *Gemora*, that we read the Megillah as a “remembrance of the miracle” performed for Mordechai and Esther, who cried out during their time of distress both during the day and the night, and this is why we read the Megillah during both times. Rav Soloveitchik felt that this “double reading” hearkens to the idea expressed in the previously cited *Gemora* (*Berachos 32b*) that if one is not answered the first time, then וקוה אל ה' – one should place their hope in Hashem by praying a second time. This perspective towards the reading of Megillah as a form of prayer is also borne out by the *Magen Avrohom* (689:10) who explicitly compares the reading of the Megillah to a prayer service that requires the presence of a full minyan for one person to be exempted by someone else’s reading (unless the person being exempted is not able to read for himself, in which case he can fulfill his obligation by listening to another person even without a full minyan).

Rav Olshin notes that there is a four-way dispute in the *Gemora*

(*Megillah 19a*) about which parts of the Megillah are absolutely indispensable in terms of what needs to be read to fulfill one’s obligation (we hold that the entire Megillah is indispensable). One opinion holds that it is only necessary to read from the beginning of the second half of the Megillah, which talks about בלילה ההוא (*Esther 6:1*), the fateful night when Achashverosh could not sleep and was told about the heroic deed of Mordechai in saving King Achashverosh from an assassination plot, leading to the miraculous shifting of the scales in favor of the Jewish people. Although the miracle was not immediate, the favor shown to Mordechai at this juncture constituted an indication by Hashem that deliverance was “on the way” and that the Purim miracle was fully in motion.

In furtherance of this explanation, Rav Olshin cites the commentary of Rabbi Avrohom, son of the Vilna Gaon, to the prayer that we recite in the Shemoneh Esreh thrice daily משען ומבטח לצדיקים – [*Hashem is the*] support and the assurance of the righteous. What does the word “support” add to the blessing? Rabbi Avrohom explains that the idea of “support” can be found in the miracle of Purim, whereby the honor accorded to Mordechai by Achashverosh of having Haman parade him through town provided

a glimpse of further deliverance, even though the decree of Haman was still in place. Indeed, Mordechai returned to his ashes and sackcloth in his penitence on behalf of the Jewish people even in the aftermath of his triumphant pageantry (see *Rashi, Esther* 6:12). Nonetheless, this type of support is provided by Hashem to strengthen the faith of the righteous ones, including Mordechai. The strengthening of faith ultimately led to the ability of the entire Jewish people to re-accept the Torah with a renewed sense of voluntariness, as described at the end of the Purim story (see *Esther* 9:27, *Shabbos* 88a).

Sometimes, notes Rav Olshin, we are in such difficult straits that it is difficult to see the light at the end of the tunnel. We need to look for those glimmers of “support” from Hashem that send the message to us that Hashem is watching out for us and that we will yet experience a complete deliverance. This is the message of the significance of the passages in the Megillah beginning with the story of what happened on “that night.”

We can also add that the entire story of Megillas Esther is based on הסתר פנים – a time when there was an absence of the visible manifestation of the Divine presence. As the *Gemora* states (*Chulin* 139b), the hint of Esther in the Torah is the

ואנכי הסתר אסתיר פני ביום ההוא – *and I will hide My face at that time*, which speaks of the lack of our ability to perceive the Divine presence during dark times in our history. Nonetheless, the Megillah tells us that it is precisely at that moment of בלילה ההוא, when things appear to be as dark as the middle of the night, that Hashem prepares salvation. The key to meriting redemption is not to give up, in the same way that Mordechai persisted in his prayers, and in his efforts to alert Esther as to the importance of trusting in Hashem in terms of taking the necessary steps to use her position to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people.

Famously, Mordechai informed Esther that (*Esther* 4:14) אם תחרישי בעת הזאת רוח והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר – *if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from somewhere else*. Mordechai understood that trust in Hashem does not depend upon the actions of others, and that Hashem has many ways to bring salvation. However, the test for Esther, and for all of us, is to recognize that we are each put into a unique place to be part of the process of bringing redemption. Even in the depths of darkness and despair, we will help effectuate relief and deliverance

Continued on page 9



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Rabbi Yosef Posner

Rabbi, Lubavitch Chabad of Skokie



Did you ever think about the extreme strangeness of the opening story of the Megillah? King Achashverosh makes a party, orders Queen Vashti to appear, and she refuses to come – publicly humiliating the king. He does not know what to do and summons his advisors. Instead of focusing on how to deal with such blatant disregard of direct orders from the king, Memuchan is concerned about the precedent this will set for the populace at large, and advises that Vashti must be punished and an order must be issued that every man is a ruler in his own home.

Isn't it obvious that defying a direct order from the king, even if the perpetrator is a queen, is punishable by death? Why should the king even need to consult with his advisors about such an obvious thing? Later on in the Megillah we read of Esther's message to Mordechai that if she, the queen, would so much as enter the King's chamber unbidden, the law is that she must die. How much more so that a queen who defies the king must die. Beyond

that, the mere fact that Memuchan glosses over Vashti's disrespect for the king and instead worries about Joe Sixpack being respected by his wife, is the height of disrespect for the king. How could Memuchan even say such a thing to the king?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe (*Likutei Sichos* Vol. 36 p. 161) says that the answer lies in understanding the nature of this party. Achashverosh actually made two parties: the first was for his ministers and servants and lasted for 180 days. He then made a party for all of the residents of Shushan, the capital city. At this second party, the king established as a fundamental principle that everything was to be done according to the wishes of each guest. No one was to be forced to drink if he did not want to, even though the norm at such feasts at that time was that each person was required to drink a large cup of wine in honor of the king who was hosting the feast.

Once we realize that the guiding principle of this second party was to give free reign to the desires of each and every participant, we can

understand that this freedom may have extended to Vashti as well, that she too was free to choose to do as she desired despite what the king would have liked. Achashverosh knew that he had granted license to everyone to do exactly as they pleased and therefore it was no longer cut and dry as to whether Vashti's refusal was out of bounds or not. On the one hand, she was defying a direct order from the king, but on the other hand, she was acting within the specific guidelines that the king himself had established allowing each person to have their desires fulfilled.

While Achashverosh no doubt was displeased that Vashti had defied him and his request, he was not sure whether there was a legal basis for him to take action. He therefore summoned the council of advisors to determine whether Vashti was in fact included in the freedom he had granted to everyone, or perhaps defying a direct order from the king still was considered an act of rebellion deserving capital punishment. Or, maybe they could find some other reason to justify punishing Vashti.

Memuchan rose to the challenge. Sidestepping the issue of Vashti defying the king's order, he raised the question of how this will affect society beyond the party. While at the party full freedom may have

been granted to do as you wish, this permissiveness had not been made the norm permanently throughout the realm. And, therefore, while Vashti might not be accountable for defying the king, there were still grounds to oust her due to what she was doing to the orderly structure of society in general.

This explains much of the narrative as well as the choice of words in the opening chapter of the Megillah. But why does the Megillah find it necessary to tell this to us, and what lesson are we to derive from it?

Achashverosh had created such a free and open atmosphere at the party that he himself, the absolute monarch, ruler over 127 countries, was unable to enforce his own wishes. What prompted Achashverosh to throw such a wild party? By Achashverosh's calculations the prophesied seventy years of Babylonian exile had elapsed, and seeing that the Jews were still in Golus and the Bais Hamikdash was not being rebuilt, he decided it was time to celebrate and to feature the captured utensils of the Bais Hamikdash at his feast.

Certainly, in view of the rules for this feast which Achashverosh had established, the Jewish people should have felt free to decline the invitation to attend such a party celebrating the permanence of their

status of seeming abandonment by Hashem. But, they didn't. Not only did they attend out of fear that declining the king's invitation would cause the king to be angry with them, they actually enjoyed themselves at this party! And, this, the *Gemara* (*Megillah* 12a) says, is why they brought upon themselves the decree of Haman that all the Jews be destroyed.

One takeaway from this is that often we think that we must do things to please the Achashveroshes of the world or else they can do us great harm, when in truth we are free to do what we know is right and to act true to our own selves. Not only will Achashverosh be unable to harm us, he won't even take offense, because he has already established the freedom for every person to do as he sees fit.

Obsequious accommodation to Achashverosh is not a means of surviving in Golus, but of prolonging it. Only when Esther shows what her priorities are by first fasting for three days and only then going to the king does the direction of the story turn towards the positive.

The *Megillah* is not only the story of the wasted opportunity to exercise the freedom we had, to do as we truly wished. It is also the story of the Jewish people finally freely expressing their true desire which had been obscured for a thousand years.

The *Gemara* (*Shabbos* 88a) says that when Hashem gave us the Torah He held the mountain over us as if to say, "Accept the Torah or I will bury you here." Thus, at any time when the Jews would be held accountable for failure to uphold the Torah they could claim that they had been coerced into accepting the Torah and therefore it was not binding upon them, and there would be no consequences for failing to observe it. The *Gemara* goes on to say that during the events of Purim they affirmed that acceptance freely and willingly.

When exactly did that happen? The *Gemara* (*ibid.*) derives this new acceptance from the words "*kimu v'kiblu*" (*Esther* 9:27) towards the end of *Megillat Esther*. The conventional understanding is that in the celebratory phase at the end of the *Megillah* the Jews felt so good about themselves and their being Jewish that they of their own accord reaffirmed the covenant at Sinai. The Alter Rebbe gives another explanation. He says that it was during the time of Haman's decree. For nearly an entire year, from Pesach time until the following Purim, the decree that all Jews were to be killed in one day hung over the heads of the Jews. Had anyone opted to renounce their Jewishness,

Continued on page 9

Feel Free to Act Free Freely

Rabbi Yosef Posner

continued from page 8

they would have been exempted from this decree. On the other hand, identifying as a Jew at that time did not offer any obvious benefits, and one could look forward to certain death on the 13th of Adar. Despite that, not a single Jew opted out during that entire year. Every Jew willingly and happily identified as Jews, thus willingly affirming that

identity which was seemingly forced upon us at the Giving of the Torah.

Our celebrating our freedom to do as our souls desire even while in Golus should lead us to the celebration of total freedom from all of the hindrances of Golus as we look forward to dancing into Geulah with the coming of Moshiach NOW!

Don't Give Up Hope

Rabbi Yona Reiss

continued from page 4

by turning our hope and faith to Hashem in prayer. Furthermore, Rav Chaim Friedlander (*Sifsei Chaim, Purim*, page 182) writes that we learn from Mordechai's return to prayer even after his celebratory pageant that prayer is not merely the means to deliverance, but is the purpose of our predicament so that we can become closer to Hashem. In the process, we strengthen our faith and sense of resolve to fulfill our mission in this world.

There is a happiness in the air around Purim time – משנכנס אדר מרבין

בשמחה (the month of Adar heralds a season of joy). Based on the above analysis, we can understand that this happiness is rooted in strengthening our connection to Hashem. The Purim story teaches us that even when things look dismal and dreary, the antidote is to seize the moment to reinforce our connection to Hashem through persistent prayer and faith, and thus to create ונהפוך הוא (*Esther* 9:1) – a complete and utter transformation from gloom to happiness, from existential desiccation to spiritual elevation.



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