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2 | *Shoshanat Yaakov: A Rose by our Name*

RAV YONA REISS

8 | *Sirtut of Megillat Esther and the
Underlying Meaning of Purim*

RABBI NOACH GOLDSTEIN

12 | *The Mound, the Ditch, and a Partial
Explanation of the Mystery of Antisemitism*

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Shoshanat Yaakov: A Rose by our Name*

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In Ashkenazic prayer liturgy the *piyut* of *Shoshanat Yaakov* is recited following the recitation of *Megillat Esther* on Purim. It is also commonly sung during Purim as a festive song. In this essay we shall explore its historical origins, halakhic significance and textual structure and meaning in the hope of gaining a greater appreciation and deeper understanding of this happy holiday hymn.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS

Interestingly, *Shoshanat Yaakov* was not originally composed as a stand-alone *piyut*, but rather emerged over time as an intriguing amalgamation of liturgy and literature.

The opening verses of *Shoshanat Yaakov* (literally, “the rose of Jacob”) comprise the final verses of *Asher Heini*, the acrostic *piyut* that is recited in full after the nighttime reading of *Megillat Esther*. The *Asher Heini* hymn appears in the *Machzor Vitri* (11th Century), which records that it originated with the *Anshei Keneset HaGedolah* during the Second *Beis Hamikdash* period. Others surmise, based on its style and wording, that our text of *Asher Heini* was composed by an unidentified *paytan* around the fifth century of the common era.

However, the *piyut* of *Asher Heini*, including the last two acrostic sentences beginning with *Shoshanat Yaakov*, concludes prior to the verses beginning with

Arur Haman (“cursed is Haman”) which are appended to the *Shoshanat Yaakov* stanzas. The text of these additional verses comes from a combination of the first stanza of a Purim evening *piyut* entitled *Arur Haman* which is also recorded in the *Machzor Vitri* (including the words “*brucha Esther ba’adi*”) and from a halakhic passage in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (which accounts for the remainder of the *Shoshanat Yaakov* text).

Notwithstanding its multitudinous origins, the amalgamated paragraph that begins with *Shoshanat Yaakov* and ends with the words *ve’gam Charvona Zachur Latov* (“Charvona shall also be remembered favorably”) has come to represent a self-standing unit in the Purim liturgy known in its totality as *Shoshanat Yaakov*. It is also a ubiquitous part of the Purim service, recited both after the nighttime and daytime readings of *Megillat Esther*, unlike its progenitor *Asher Heini* which is only recited in full at night.

HALAKHIC SIGNIFICANCE

What is the significance of the placement of *Shoshanat Yaakov* as a stand-alone *piyut* following the Megillah reading?

Unquestionably, the centerpiece of the festival of Purim is the fulfillment of the obligation to recite *Megillat Esther* once at night and once during the day. The recitation of the Megillah is joyous, spirited and exhilarating. A *Ba’al Kriyah*

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reads the Megillah, but in truth everyone in attendance participates by reciting certain verses out loud and noisily clanging their groggers at each mention of Haman's name.

However, the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Megillah* 3:7) cites the opinion of Rav that there is also a requirement to say “cursed is Haman, cursed are his children” as well as the opinion of R' Pinchos who added that one should say “Charvona (one of the chamberlains of King Achashverosh who interceded on behalf of the Jews) should be remembered favorably.” *Masechet Sofrim* (14:3) formally incorporates these recitations into the prayer service by noting that immediately following the concluding benediction after the reading of the Megillah, the congregation should recite “the righteous should be praised: blessed is Mordechai, blessed is Esther, blessed are all the Jewish people,” and that in accordance with the opinions of Rav and of R' Pinchos,

the worshipers should add both the phrase “cursed is Haman and cursed are his sons,” and that “Charvona shall be remembered favorably.”

Along these lines, the Tur in his summary of the laws of reading the Megillah (*Orach Chaim*, Chapter 690) includes a requirement to recite these statements which are described in the *Yerushalmi*. Interestingly, the Tur's version of the *Yerushalmi* (which appears to be the same as the version cited by *Tosafot* in *Megillah* 7b, s.v. “*delo yada*”) is more elaborate, including not only the elements of the *Masechet Sofrim* version but also the additional language: “cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordechai, cursed is Zeresh (Haman's wife), blessed is Esther, cursed are the wicked, blessed are the righteous, and Charvona should also be remembered favorably.” The requirement of the recitation of these sentences is similarly codified in the *Shulkhan Arukh* (O”C 690:16).

Accordingly, the inclusion of the amalgamated *piyut* of *Shoshanat Yaakov* in the prayer liturgy immediately following the reading of the Megillah represents on its most fundamental level a fulfillment of the requirement from the *Yerushalmi* to recite the concluding verses of curses and blessings, as is noted by the *Arukh Hashulchan* (O”C 690:22). In fact, following the introductory verses (from the conclusion of the *piyut* of *Asher Heini*), the remainder of the *piyut* consists of a near-verbatim repetition of the phrases mentioned by the Tur, beginning with “blessed is Mordechai” and concluding with “and Charvona should also be remembered favorably.” The only additional insertions in these final phrases of *Shoshanat Yaakov* are rhythmic embellishments found in the *Machzor Vitri* pertaining to the nature of the wickedness of Haman and Zeresh (i.e., Haman “wanted to destroy me” and Zeresh



was the “wife of the one who terrorized me”), and contrasting descriptions of the noble identities and actions of Mordechai and Esther (i.e., Mordechai was “a *yehudi*” and Esther served “on my behalf”).

TEXTUAL STRUCTURE AND MEANING

However, while the placement of *Shoshanat Yaakov* in the Purim prayer service is understood from the standpoint of the *Yerushalmi*, there are a couple of obvious questions that require further explanation:

(1) Why is there a need to add, even after the daytime reading of the Megillah when the remainder of *Asher Heini* is omitted, the introductory verses of *Shoshanat Yaakov*, rather than simply the recitation of the phrases that are recorded in the *Yerushalmi*?

(2) Why does the first sentence, and effective title, of this amalgamated prayer contain the words *Shoshanat Yaakov* – what is the “Rose of Jacob” and what does it have to do with the story of Purim?

Surprisingly, the answer to the first question may relate to another well-known *halakha* regarding the celebration of the Purim holiday. The *Shulkhan Arukh* (O”C 695:2) rules, based on a statement in the Talmud (*Megillah* 7b) that *chayav inish levasumei be-Puria* – a man is obligated to become intoxicated on Purim until he does not know the difference *bein arur Haman l’baruch Mordechai* – between the curse of Haman and the blessing of Mordechai. This ruling has spawned much literature both with respect to the propriety and parameters of drunkenness (the Rema rules that it is sufficient for one to drink just enough to become drowsy and fall asleep, and the *Bi’ur Halacha*, ad locum, concludes that if excessive drinking will lead to levity or violation of Mitzvot, it should not be undertaken) and with respect to the

meaning of “not knowing the difference” between the curse of Haman and the blessing of Mordechai.

It is in this context that *Tosafot* (ibid.) cites the *Yerushalmi*, noting that the *Yerushalmi* (according to the version of *Tosafot*) not only makes reference to the “curse of Haman and blessing of Mordechai,” but also to “the curse of Zeresh, blessing of Esther, curse of the wicked, and blessing of the righteous.” The Beit Yosef (O”C 695) explains that the reason why *Tosafot* saw fit to point out the extended text of the *Yerushalmi* is because most people, even if they are a little tipsy, will not err in the recitation of “cursed is Haman, blessed is Mordechai.” However, once additional and less familiar phrases are included, such as “the curse of Zeresh” it is more likely that a person will flub these lines and therefore be able to more easily fulfill the obligation of “not knowing.” Indeed, the Rashash (*Megillah* 7b, s.v. “ad”) postulates that at the time of the Talmud there was a song that began with “*Arur Haman*” and continued throughout the entire alphabet (consistent with the acrostic pattern found in the *Arur Haman piyut* in the *Machzor Vitri*) so that it would be very difficult for someone to recite the entirety of the text in flawless fashion, especially after imbibing some wine.

According to this explanation, the obligation of drinking until one “does not know the difference between the curse of Haman and blessing of Mordechai” should be interpreted to mean that one should reach the point until he “does not know” all of the words of the song about “the difference between the curse of Haman and the blessing of Mordechai, etc.” Therefore, the *piyut* of *Shoshanat Yaakov* which contains the language of the *Yerushalmi*, may very well have been deliberately elongated with additional phrases and sentences to make it

easier for a person who consumed a little bit of wine to fulfill his obligation of reaching the point of not being able to recite the full text of the song fluently. While the drinking obligation is not technically operative until after the recitation of the Megillah (see *Rambam, Megillah 2:15*), the official text of the song, including additional imprecations and blessings and appending the final lines of *Asher Heini*, may have been established as part of the permanent Purim prayer liturgy so that it could be utilized as a litmus test for the ritual threshold of drunkenness.

According to this approach, we can also appreciate the custom cited in the *Yalkut Yosef (Kitzur Shulkhan Arukh O”C, chapter 690)* for *Sephardim*, who do not have the custom to recite the verses of *Shoshanat Yaakov*, to repeat the recitation of the stanzas regarding the “curse of Haman and blessing of Mordechai” three times. One explanation for this custom might be that the phrases are repeated three times for the purpose of *pirsumei nisa* – of publicizing the miracle of Purim, in the same way that the Rabbis enacted that other ritual recitations, such as those accompanying the sanctification of the new moon (*Mishnah, Rosh Hashanah 3:7*) and the cutting of the *Omer* sheaves (*Mishnah, Menachos 10:3*), be repeated multiple times. However, we can suggest as well that additional recitations may have been established in order to heighten the difficulty of reciting the words with perfect accuracy through successive recitations and thus lower the threshold for the required amount of intoxication on the Purim holiday.

Still, the words themselves surely have special meaning. What is the import of the effective name of the amalgamated *piyut* – *Shoshanat Yaakov*? Reb Tzadok HaKohen M’Lublin (*Pri Tzadik, Sefer Shmos, Shushan Purim*, paragraph 1) notes (based on the



Arizal) that the numerical value of the word *Shoshanah* coincides with that of the name *Esther* (661). Hence, *Shoshanah* is a reference to *Esther HaMalkah*. It is also a reference, states Reb Tzadok, to the entirety of the Jewish people who are described in *Shir Hashirim (2:2)* as “a rose among the thorns.” More significantly, he notes that the entire first sentence of the *piyut*, which refers to “exultation and happiness” (*tzahala ve’samecha*) and to the “royal blue apparel (*techeles*) of Mordechai” is an allusion to the verse in *Megillat Esther (8:15)* that describes the grandeur of Mordechai when he was adorned in regal clothing, thus causing the “city of Shushan” to be in a state of “exultation and happiness.” It is thus plausible, concludes Reb Tzadok, to see in the word *Shoshanah* a reference as well to the city of Shushan in which, according to the Talmud (*Megillah 12b*), the great sages of the Jewish people resided.

But what does this have to do with *Yaakov* (Jacob)? One simple explanation may be that since *Yaakov* was the progenitor of the Jewish people, and *Shoshanah* stands for the entirety of the Jewish people, considered a “rose among the thorns” and represented by *Esther* who was also likened

to a rose, it is appropriate to underscore the fact that the miracle of Purim was a victory for both the totality and the eternity of the Jewish people.

The *Tàamei Haminhagim* (*Kuntrus Acharon, Inyanei Megillah*, paragraph 12) offers another explanation in the name of the *Korban Ani*. According to tradition, it was actually Yaakov who originally prayed for the downfall of Haman when he entreated Hashem to “rescue me from the hands of my brother, from the hands of Esav,” a prayer that begins with the Hebrew words “*Hatzileni Na Miyad*” of which the first letters (HMN, although not in order) spell out the name “Haman.” Accordingly, the defeat of Haman was actually a testament to Yaakov’s prayer and for his solicitous concern for the future of the Jewish nation. Therefore, during the moment of jubilation following the reading of the Megillah, it is appropriate to refer to the Jewish people as *Shoshanat Yaakov* – the rose of Jacob which he had tenderly gardened and protected.

The notion of *Shoshanat Yaakov* alluding to the continuity of the destiny of the Jewish people, as represented by Yaakov’s initial encounter with Esav, is underscored by the succeeding stanzas of the *piyut*, which twice make reference to the “eternity” (*la-netzach*) of the Purim victory, as well as the yearnings (*ve’tikvatam*) of each and every generation (*be’chol dor v’dor*) for the salvation of Hashem. Similarly, the phrase that “those who depend on you should not be embarrassed [for eternity]” (*ve’lo yikalmu la’netzach kol hachosim bach*) can be understood as an allusion to the preservation of Yaakov’s honor through the defeat of Esav’s wicked descendant.

DEEPER UNDERSTANDING

It remains for us to understand why there is a requirement altogether, as stated by the *Yerushalmi*, to add additional verses of imprecation and blessings after *Megillat Esther*, detailing the evil of Haman and the goodness of Esther, has already been read.

According to the explanation of *Tosafot* that the recitation facilitates the fulfillment of the inebriation imperative on Purim, it is understood that there is a benefit to adding tongue-tying phrases and stanzas to the *piyut*. However, the basic requirement to accentuate the distinction between the evil of our enemies and the virtue of our heroes requires further elucidation.

One explanation, articulated by the Avudraham (*Seder Tefilat Purim*) and also delineated in *Masechet Sofrim* (ibid.) is that the additional mention of Haman and Mordechai and their respective attributes is a fulfillment of the verse in *Mishlei* (10:7) “the righteous should be remembered for a blessing but the name of the wicked shall rot.” Rav Dovid Chai HaKohen (Rosh Yeshiva of Netivot HaTora in Bat Yam), in an essay on this *piyut*, provides a second explanation. Since the Talmud (*Megillah* 30a; see *Machazis Hashekel, O”C* 688:10) indicates that the reading of the Megillah should be juxtaposed with the prior reading of *Parshat Zachor* (which deals with the eradication of the nation of Amalek, from whom Haman descended) based on the verse in *Megillat Esther* (9:28) that states “these days shall be mentioned and performed,” it follows that the verbal articulation of the evil of Haman is a necessary component of the active precept of wiping out Amalek, which therefore necessitates recitation by each member of the congregation.

Perhaps these two reasons form one overarching theme: precisely at the time when we gather as a community to

remember the viciousness of our enemies and the kindness of Hashem to rescue us through our righteous ones, and to promote the righteous to their proper place of glory through the royal garments presented to Mordechai, we are in the ideal state of mind to fulfill both of these precepts in the optimal fashion – namely, the precept of showing appreciation for the righteous and condemnation for the wicked, and the commandment to wipe out the evil of Amalek.

This can be compared to the Midrash (cited by Rashi, *Bereishit* 46:29) that recounts that when Yaakov was reunited with his son Yosef after twenty-two years of separation his immediate reaction was to recite the prayer of *Shema Yisroel*. The Maharal (*Gur Aryeh*, ad locum) explains that at the moment that Yaakov experienced the absolute joy of having his most heartfelt prayer answered, he was in the best possible state of mind to accept upon himself the yoke of Heaven through recitation of the *Shema*. Similarly, at the height of our “exultation and happiness” and appreciation of the faith and fortitude of Mordechai and Esther after we have completed the reading of the Megillah, we take advantage of our heightened state of understanding and appreciation to decry villainy and herald virtue, and to demarcate the boundaries between evil and good in this world. We are able to discern the villainy of Haman and his cohorts, and appreciate those who truly have the interest of the Jewish people at heart, whether they are among the Jewish people like Esther and Mordechai, or even the “righteous among the nations” like Charvona. Just like Yaakov at the time of his recitation of *Kriyat Shema*, we must each be a contemporary “rose of Jacob” capitalizing upon the momentum of our emotions.

Nonetheless, despite this critical recognition of the lines between good and

evil, we do not despair over the wickedness in this world. We strive over the course of Purim to reach the point of “intoxication” in which the lines become blurred, in which even those associated with Haman can become blessed through the embrace of righteousness. As the Talmud (*Gittin* 57b) recounts, descendants of Haman eventually learned Torah in B’nei Brak. We recognize and celebrate the fact, as R’ Pinchos taught, that “Charvona shall also be remembered favorably.” So long as we maintain a clear value system predicated upon the Torah and Mitzvot and stand up for the precious legacy of Yaakov, we can transform evil into good and wrongdoers into paradigms of virtue, just as a chamberlain of the wicked Achashverosh became a heroic figure.

The “rose” of *Shoshanat Yaakov* has particular resonance in the modern age. We are constantly surrounded by enemies and thorn bushes from all sides, both physical and spiritual. Ultimately, the perennial rose of Yaakov, of endurance, perseverance, prayer and atonement, is what enables victory over adversity. However, this rose can only flourish when there is a clear discernment between the wickedness of those who seek to destroy us, and the goodness of those who are exerting themselves on behalf of the Jewish people and our sacred Torah heritage. The very recognition that we must pray to be saved “from my brother, from Esav” and that there are clear boundaries between evil and righteousness is a prerequisite for an appreciation of the story of *Megillat Esther* and the ability to redeem and repair an imperfect world. In fact, we are not allowed to walk away from the Megillah reading without clearly reminding ourselves of these boundaries. If we care enough to tend to our rose, it shall blossom *b’Ezrat Hashem* into the flowering of our redemption. ■

Sirtut of Megillat Esther and the Underlying Meaning of Purim

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Every Megillah has classic identifying features. We recognize the parchment and the letters. We know that it's rolled in a single scroll. And if we open any Megillah and look carefully, we can find lines scored across the parchment. This is called שרטוט, *sirtut*, and while at first glance this may seem like a non-remarkable feature, it may secretly hold the key to one of the deepest questions of *Megillat Esther*. Let's explain.

The Gemara¹ derives the requirement to do *sirtut* to the Megillah parchment from a *pasuk* in *Megillat Esther*:

“דְּבַרֵי שְׁלוֹם וְאֱמֶת” (אסתר ט:ל): אָמַר רַבִּי תַנְחִיב, וְאָמַרְי לֵה אָמַר רַבִּי אָסִי, מְלַמֵּד שְׁפָרִיכָה שְׁרָטוּט כְּאֱמִיתָה שֶׁל תּוֹרָה

The phrase “דברי שלום ואמת” (words of peace and truth) describing the letter that Mordechai and Esther sent out – i.e. *Megillat Esther* – teaches that just like “אמיתה של” (the truth of Torah) requires *sirtut*, so does a Megillah. The question is what is this “אמיתה של תורה” that the Gemara links to *Megillat Esther*?

Rashi explains that this simply refers to a *Sefer Torah*; just like a *Sefer Torah* requires *sirtut*, so does a Megillah. Rashi assumes that a *Sefer Torah* itself requires *sirtut*, which is indeed our practice. However,

there is no explicit source in the *Talmud Bavli* stating that a *Sefer Torah* requires *sirtut*, and Rabbeinu Tam² thinks that this is incorrect. The Gemara³ does clearly state that we possess a *halacha l'Moshe miSinai*, a law to Moshe from Sinai, that *mezuzot* require *sirtut*, and Rabbeinu Tam argues that the “אמיתה של תורה” that the Gemara links to the Megillah is actually *mezuzot* – which contain the foundational Torah principle of *kabalat ol malchut Shamayim* (accepting the yoke of Heaven) - not *Sifrei Torah*.

Rabbeinu Tam marshals a brilliant proof that “דברי שלום ואמת” does not link *Megillat Esther* to *Sifrei Torah* from another Gemara in Megillah. The *Mishna*⁴ states that a Megillah must be written on parchment with black ink, and the Gemara⁵ derives this from a *gezeirah shavah* (Oral Law Tradition to draw inferences from repetition of identical phrases): In *Megillat Esther* the *pasuk* states “וַתִּכְתֹּב אֶסְתֵּר הַמְּלָכָה”, and in *Sefer Yirmiyahu* it states “וַיֹּאמֶר לְהֵם” “כְּרוּךְ מִפְּי יְקָרָא אֱלִי אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנֹאֲנִי כְּרוּךְ עַל הַסֵּפֶר בְּדִי” “כְּרוּךְ מִפְּי יְקָרָא אֱלִי אֵת כָּל הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וְנֹאֲנִי כְּרוּךְ עַל הַסֵּפֶר בְּדִי”, thus teaching that just as the *pasuk* in *Yirmiyahu* refers to “writing” being done on parchment (*sefer*) with black ink (די), so too the writing of *Esther* is done

1 מגילה ט"ז עמוד ב'

2 מנחות ל"ב עמוד ב' תוס' ד"ה הא מורידין, גיטין ו' עמוד א' תוס' ד"ה א"ר יצחק, ספר הישר חלק החידושים ס' ק"ד

3 מנחות ל"ב עמוד ב'

4 מגילה י"ז עמוד ב'

5 שם י"ט עמוד א'

with parchment and black ink.

But Rabbeinu Tam notes that it's surprising for the Gemara to go off to seek a source from *Sefer Yirmiyahu*. After all, every *Sefer Torah* must be written with parchment and black ink! So if Rashi is correct that "דברי שלום ואמת" links *Megillat Esther* to a *Sefer Torah* to require *sirtut*, then it should also be used to link *Megillat Esther* to a *Sefer Torah* to require parchment and black ink! Why require one source from "דברי שלום ואמת" for *sirtut* and a second source from "ותכתב אסתר" for parchment and black ink? Rather, Rabbeinu Tam concludes, "דברי שלום ואמת" links *Megillat Esther* to *mezuzot*, which cannot double as the source for parchment because a *mezuzah* requires a different form of parchment called "דוכסוסטוס" (the inner layer of a split animal hide).⁶

The Brisker Rav⁷ develops a fascinating defense for Rashi. First, we need to look at the Rambam's opinion. The Rambam⁸ agrees with Rashi that a *Sefer Torah* requires *sirtut*, and that this is what the Gemara meant that a Megillah requires *sirtut* just like "אמיתה של תורה".⁹ Therefore he also needs a defense from Rabbeinu Tam's proof. Additionally, the Brisker Rav notes a subtle problem in the Rambam's language¹⁰ requiring *sirtut*:

אין כותבין המגילה אלא בקדיו על הגויל או על

הקלף קספך תורה... וצריכה שרטוט כתורה עצמה
A Megillah may only be written with ink on *g'vil* or *klaf* (parchment) like a *Sefer Torah*... and it requires *sirtut* like Torah itself.

When presenting the requirements for ink and parchment, the Rambam writes that the Megillah must be "like a Torah scroll," but when presenting the requirement for *sirtut*, the Rambam alters his formulation to write "like Torah itself." What is the reason for this change?

According to the Brisker Rav, the key to both questions is that there are two distinct sets of halachot here pertaining to the Megillah. The requirement for ink and parchment relates to the physical make-up of the Megillah.¹¹ A kosher Megillah must have a specific physical form: the writing must be on parchment and the writing substance must be ink. On the other hand, *sirtut* is not rooted in the Megillah's structure, but rather its status. Whenever there are *kitvei hakodesh*, holy writings, there is a *halacha l'Moshe miSinai* that the surface of *kitvei hakodesh* must be scored with lines. *Sirtut* visibly differentiates *kitvei hakodesh* from regular writings.¹²

This distinction beautifully explains the Rambam's language: The Rambam specifically writes that the Megillah requires ink and parchment like a Torah scroll,

6 מנחות לב עמוד א'
ערוך השלחן י"ד
רע"א:כ"א-כ"ב

7 חידושי מרן רי"ז הלוי הל' מגילה, עמ' י"ב

8 הל' תפילין ומזוזה וספר תורה פרק א' הלכה י"ב

9 הל' מגילה פרק ב' הלכה ט

Ibid 10

11 In the Brisker Rav's language, עצמה של מגילה,

12 See עמק ברכה הל' תפילין אות א' who quotes a similar opinion of the Brisker Rav about *sirtut* in a different context.

emphasizing the physical aspect. However, when referring to *sirtut*, the Rambam stresses that the Megillah is *keTorah atzma*, like Torah itself, i.e. it has a similar status to Torah. Similarly, we now have a response to Rabbeinu Tam's question why the Gemara would need two separate sources. The laws of parchment and ink on the one hand, and *sirtut* on the other, actually reflect completely different concepts and different links between *Megillat Esther* and Torah, which is why two different sources are needed: the *gezeirah shava* of כתיבה - כתיבה focuses on the physical element of parchment and ink, and "דברי שלום ואמת" focuses on the status of *Megillat Esther*. The Gemara derives from "דברי שלום ואמת" that the words of Megillat Esther have a similar status to the words of Torah, and therefore require *sirtut* just like words of Torah.

The Brisker Rav proves his argument by citing a *Yerushalmi*.¹³ The *Yerushalmi* cites the same *drasha* (exegetical interpretation) from "דברי שלום ואמת", but adds a telling line:

הרי היא כאמיתה שלתורה. מה זו צריכה סירטוט
אף זו צריכה סירטוט. מה זו ניתנה להידרש אף זו
ניתנה להידרש

Megillat Esther is just like the truth of Torah. Just like one needs *sirtut*, so does the other need *sirtut*. Just like one is given to be expounded so too the other is given to be expounded.

The *Yerushalmi* says that just like we can make *drashot* from שבכתב, so too we can make *drashot* from *Megillat Esther*. But the obvious problem is what does making *drashot* from the Megillah



have to do with scoring *sirtut* onto the parchment of the Megillah?! The Brisker Rav's answer is crystal clear: both have to do with the status of the Megillah. The basic concept is that *Megillat Esther* has a sanctified status, linked to Torah. Therefore it simultaneously teaches that the Megillah requires *sirtut*, like words of Torah, and we can derive *drashot* from it, just like from words of Torah.

This idea about the relationship between *Megillat Esther* and Torah, highlighted by "דברי שלום ואמת" and the requirement for *sirtut*, cuts to the core of Purim and the Megillah. *Chazal*¹⁴ describe the struggle Mordechai and Esther waged with the other *chachamim* of the time whether *Megillat Esther* should be included in Tanach. "כתבוני" ("Write me for all generations") Esther insisted. The *chachamim* pushed back, objecting that Esther's demand was unprecedented. Who had ever argued for a new holiday with new Mitzvot? We have an axiomatic principle "אין נביא רשאי להחדש" – "דבר" – no prophet may come along and

13 מגילה פרק א' הלכה א

14 מגילה ז' עמוד א', ירושלמי מגילה פרק א' הלכה ה', רות רבה פרק ד' אות ה

15 ביאור, ד"ה אלא שאין מוקדם ומאחר בתורה

add unilateral innovations and additions to Torah law!

The Gemara cites the arguments back and forth, until ultimately the chachamim conceded to Mordechai and Esther based on a *drasha* to allow the addition of the Megillah. The *Yerushalmi* even quotes *Amoraim* that *Megillat Esther* was “stated to Moshe at Sinai.” R. Chaim Kanievesky¹⁵ understands that the Gemara literally means that Hashem told Moshe that one day there would be a Purim miracle and a *Megillat Esther*. The *Maharatz Chayes*¹⁶ explains that this is actually a reference to *Chazal’s* ability to make *drashot* on *pesukim* through the נדרשת מהתורה (hermeneutic principles of the Torah) which makes it as if Hashem had literally told Moshe about Purim. But even this more conservative reading of the Gemara highlights *Chazal’s* very strong opinion about the connection between Torah and *Megillat Esther*.

The Rambam concludes his codification of the laws of Purim by citing the very next, well-known statement in the *Yerushalmi*:

כָּל סִפְרֵי הַנְּבִיאִים וְכָל הַפְּתוּבִים עֲתִידִין לְבָטֵל
לְיָמֵי מְשִׁיחַ חוּץ מִמְּגִלַּת אֶסְתֵּר וְנִהְיִי הִיא קְלִמָּת
כְּתוּבָה חֲמִשִּׁי תוֹרָה וְכִהְיֵה לְכֹתֵשׁ תוֹרָה שְׁבַע עֶלְפֵי
כֶּה שְׂאִינֵן בְּטָלִין לְעוֹלָם

All of the books of *Neviim* and *Ketuvim* are destined to be nullified in the messianic era, except for *Megillat Esther*. It will continue to exist together with the five books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah, which will never be nullified.

Yet again, we see the relationship between the Megillah and Torah. And

according to the Brisker Rav, this relationship is the exact message delivered by adding *sirtut* to the Megillah.

If we take Purim in context, this idea takes on special meaning. By the time of Purim, Bnei Yisrael faced a dismal reality. The *Mikdash* was gone, Yerushalayim was in ruins, and Bnei Yisrael were in exile. Even the days of prophecy were coming to a close. Haman thought this would be the last generation of Jewish history, and who could blame him. But instead, Mordechai, a member of the *Anshei Knesses HaGedolah*¹⁷, Men of the Great Assembly, led the transition to the era of *Torah Shebaal Peh*. The power at this moment of reconnecting to Har Sinai and *Matan Torah* and the emphasis on Torah’s continuity and eternity cannot be overstated.

Rashi¹⁸ explains that Yaakov’s blessing comparing Binyamin to a wolf who eats at daybreak and nightfall references Shaul, who would rise at the beginning of the Jewish kingdom in Eretz Yisrael, and Mordechai, who would rise at its end. By bringing everything full circle, Purim and *Megillat Esther* remind us that no matter how dark it gets, the connection to the *Ribbono shel Olam* and our *Mesorah* remains alive and vibrant. And as long as that’s the case, we know that the situation will eventually – *venahafoch hu* – it will be “overturned.” All of this is symbolized by the simple *sirtut* scored into our *Megillot*, a quiet but proud declaration that we are about to read true ואמת דברי שלום ואמת. ■

16 מגילה י"ט עמוד א

17 הקדמת הרמב"ם לפירוש המשניות

18 בראשית מט:כז

The Mound, the Ditch, and a Partial Explanation of the Mystery of Antisemitism

Rabbi Yochanan Posner

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The past several years have been bewildering for many Jews, as antisemitism has become more visible at both political extremes. As the *Haggadah* states, “In every generation they rise against us to destroy us.” This raises complicated questions: Why are Jews hated? Why do otherwise intelligent and decent people accept bigoted tropes? Does the problem lie with us? Must Jews change in order to be accepted?

Part of the answer lies in the story of Purim.

The Megillah recounts how Haman offered King Achashverosh vast sums of silver in exchange for permission to annihilate the Jews¹. Achashverosh replied, “The silver is given to you; the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.”² Haman’s request was granted, without even paying for a permit.

It is often assumed that Haman was the primary antisemite, while Achashverosh was merely a fool. Yet this conversation reveals that both of them desired the Jews’ destruction. Haman initiated the plot and Achashverosh eagerly embraced it; Haman offered to do what Achashverosh already wanted.

The Gemara illustrates this with a parable: Two men own fields.³ One has an unwanted mound of earth in his field, and the other has an unwanted ditch in his field.

The owner of the ditch wants earth to fill his ditch, and the owner of the mound would gladly pay to have the mound removed. They meet, and the ditch-owner offers to buy the mound. The mound-owner responds, “Take it for free, if only you had done so sooner.”

Achashverosh is compared to the owner of the mound, and Haman to the owner of the ditch.

At a Purim *farbrengen* in 1965, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, highlighted several peculiar features of this parable.⁴

A parable is meant to teach something not otherwise obvious, but we already know from the conversation in the Megillah that Achashverosh and Haman both wanted the Jews gone. What new insight does the parable provide?

Moreover, the parable doesn’t seem to correspond with the Purim story! The mound-owner suffers from the presence of something unwanted, while the ditch-owner suffers from the lack of something that he needs. How does this reflect Achashverosh and Haman? Did Haman need the Jews to move into his field?

The Rebbe explained that Achashverosh and Haman represent two distinct types of antisemites.

The first type, embodied by Achashverosh, is disturbed by the Jews’ very existence. There is no place for Jews in this antisemite’s world. Jews are not welcome, no matter how assimilated, un-Jewish, or unobtrusive they become. To the antisemite, the Jews are an alien mound in their field,

1 *Esther* 3:9

2 *Esther* 3:11

3 Gemara (*Megillah* 14a)

4 Published in *Lashon Kodesh in Toras Menachem* 5725 Vol. 43 pp. 34-46, and in *Yiddish in Sichos Kodesh* 5725 pp. 444-454.

and the mound must be removed. Nothing the Jews do can change this.

The second type, represented by Haman, experiences the Jews as a ditch, as a painful reminder of the emptiness and lack of meaning in his own life. There is an inner void he cannot name. Instead of engaging in the difficult work of self-reflection and growth, he externalizes his existential pointlessness and blames the Jews. For him, the Jew is the convenient “other.”

When such antisemites encounter a Torah-filled life of meaning, purpose, and spiritual richness, it intensifies their discomfort. As Hitler infamously said, “Conscience is a Jewish invention.” The Jew’s presence exposes what they lack, and so the Jew is hated.

Though different, both types of antisemites are similar in the sense that for both, their hatred is not caused by the Jews. It stems from the antisemites themselves.

This matters significantly. It means Jews should not blame themselves. Don’t imagine that if Mordechai would have been socially appropriate and not annoyed Haman by not bowing, or if the Jews would have been better lobbyists currying favor with Achashverosh and rationalizing their existence to him, the decree of annihilation would not have come to be. The hatred exists independently.

So what should Jews do?

We need to learn from Queen Esther and do exactly what she did. Esther does plead the Jews’ case before Achashverosh, and that isn’t remarkable, as obviously she must utilize her unique connection with the king. What is striking is how she prepared for it. She called for three days of fasting and prayer. Mordechai gathered thousands of Jewish children to daven and study Torah. Esther herself fasted for three days. She did not beautify herself to appeal physically to the king, and due to her fast she likely

appeared weak and pale.

This is remarkable. There is one person who held the power to overrule Haman’s evil decree of annihilation, and that was Achashverosh, and his motive for choosing Esther as his queen was her physical beauty, and yet Esther disregarded that and focused primarily on spiritual preparations.

Although Esther went before Achashverosh, she did not believe he would determine the outcome. She believed that Hashem would. And so, when faced with the choice of preparing physically for Achashverosh or preparing spiritually for Hashem, her choice was clear.

Esther understood that two tracks must be pursued simultaneously: the worldly track of practical effort, and the spiritual track of reliance on Hashem. Both are required, but they are not equal. Salvation comes only from Hashem; human action is necessary because the Torah demands responsible effort, not because it is the true source of deliverance.

When our beliefs and behaviors are predicated on the premise that Hashem runs the world, we are opening up ourselves to be the beneficiaries of Hashem’s miracles.

This is the ultimate response to both kinds of antisemites. Their hatred is based on their belief that they own the field, and they determine what is welcome in their field. We thoroughly reject the premise. Achashverosh and Haman don’t own the world. Hashem owns the world, and He determines who will thrive in it.

The Haggadah promises that when Jews live with this faith, “the Holy One, Blessed be He, delivers us from their hands.” May we merit the ultimate redemption with the coming of *Moshiach* speedily in our days. *Amen.*

This is my attempt to summarize that landmark Purim *farbrengen*. I encourage readers to study it in full. ■

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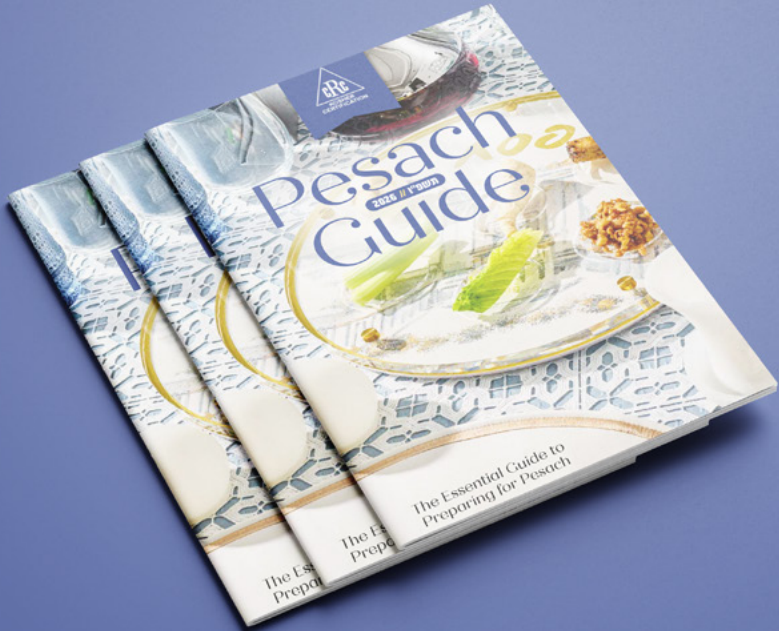


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