

*Nine Original Essays*

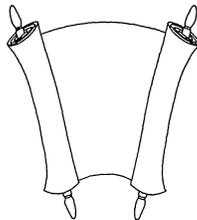


# Purim Unmasked

**A Holiday Reader**

**Our Mission:**

*To enrich  
the Cincinnati Jewish community  
by creating an environment  
of Torah study  
and providing access  
to our spiritual heritage.*



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**Honor Roll 5760-61**

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# Preface

Since the days of our childhood we have known Purim as a day of festival, revelry, and frolic, and it most certainly is just that. But as with everything in Judaism, there is a level of depth to be explored and appreciated that we can only realize as adults.

As Jews we are practically connoisseurs of irony, and no time of the year holds greater irony than Purim. Just as the story itself is one where events turn on their heads in ways you would least expect, so too our carousing on Purim masks (yes, there is symbolism there!) some of the most profound ideas.

The following essays shed light on some of these ideas. Read them, think about them, and share them with friends, in advance of Purim. In that way you will party as never before, because you will now know what you are partying about!

With wishes for a joyous and meaningful Purim,



Rabbi Meir Minster



Rabbi David Spetner

## Introduction

# Purim for the ~~Uninitiated~~ ~~Uninebriated~~

The essays in this booklet explore some of the themes which underlie the holiday of Purim, its history, its laws, and its customs. Purim takes place on the fourteenth of the Hebrew month of Adar (more on that soon), thirty days before Pesach (Passover). The following is a brief outline of the holiday and its story.

The First Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians at the end of the fifth century BCE. By the middle of the next century, the vast majority of the Jewish people was under the rule of the Persian Empire and its king, Achashveirosh (Ahasuerus). In the year 355 BCE, Haman, the Persian viceroy, convinced the King to sign an edict allowing for the eradication of all Jews in Persian territory. The Jews were now threatened with near extinction. (In contrast, the Nazis in World War II eventually controlled one third of the world's Jews.)

As Providence would have it, Achashveirosh had recently executed<sup>1</sup> his original queen, Vashti, and married Esther—who, unknown to him, was a Jewess; her uncle was a member of the Great Assembly (the rabbinical leadership at that time). Esther imposed a seventy-two hour fast on the Jews of Persia, coinciding with the first three days of Passover, after which she presented herself to the King. Two days later, Haman was hanged, and the King had authorized the defense of the Jews.

Eleven months later, on the fourteenth of Adar (the date of the planned extermination of the Jews), civil war erupted. By the end of the next day, the Jews had killed thousands of Persian antisemites in self defence, and the Jewish people was saved.

The next year, the holiday of Purim was permanently established, a celebration of the miraculous salvation of the Jews. The holiday is

observed in most places on the fourteenth of Adar; cities which were walled in the times of Joshua (such as Jerusalem) observe the holiday on the fifteenth. The thirteenth of Adar is observed as Ta'anis Esther, the sunrise-to-dusk Fast of Esther.

Four special *mitzvos* (commandments) are observed on Purim—reading the Megilla (the biblical Book of Esther); sending gifts of food (*mishlo'ach manos*, also called *shalach manos*); giving charity to the poor (*matanos l'evyonim*); and celebrating with a festive meal (*se'uda*).

The Megilla is read twice on Purim, once in the evening and once in the morning. (A Jewish calendar day begins and ends at sunset.) Whenever the name of the wicked Haman is read, the congregation responds by making noise, customarily with noisemakers called *graggers* or *ra'ashanim*.

*Mishlo'ach manos* involves sending a minimum of two types of ready-to-consume food or drink to at least one person, who needs not be poor. Typically, people give *mishlo'ach manos* to several people (neighbors, co-workers, and friends).

In contrast, *matanos l'evyonim* (gifts to the needy) must be given to at least two people, and the recipients must be poor. Although the gifts can be in the form of food or dry goods, money is usually given. Of the two types of gift-giving on Purim, this is the more important, since *mishlo'ach manos* doesn't necessarily involve helping the destitute.

The feast on Purim is eaten in the afternoon, usually in the company of friends. In contrast with other Jewish celebrations, where moderation is the norm, there is an obligation to drink alcohol at this meal.

In addition to these four *mitzvos*, many have the custom of masquerading on Purim. (This has led to the unfortunate but popular misperception that Purim is a "Jewish Halloween.") Another prevalent custom is the eating of hamentaschen (*oznei Haman* in Hebrew), triangular pastries filled with jam, fruit, or poppy seeds. These are said to resemble either Haman's hat or his ears.

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# What are You Wearing this Purim?

It's not every day that one opens his front door to discover a gorilla bearing gifts. On Purim, however, one never knows who he will meet, as queens, pirates, clowns and firemen spread throughout the neighborhood. Those ordinary people we formerly thought of as our friends and neighbors have taken on new faces and identities, at least for the day. These improbable transformations do not just happen overnight—the disguises and costumes we enjoy so much are often the products of weeks of planning and preparation. But just whom are we hiding from? Is there any meaning to be unmasked in all this madness?

The tradition of masquerading on Purim predates the writing of the *Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law)*, where the practice is described simply as adding to the joy of the day.<sup>1</sup> Other sources connect our veiled attire to specific elements of the holiday and its story. G-d's salvation of the Jewish people through the hands of Mordechai and Esther, for example, was nothing less than a hidden miracle. His orchestration of events was cleverly concealed under the guise of political intrigue in the royal palace. In commemoration, we too conceal our identities.

There are other associations, as well. According to the Talmud,<sup>2</sup> G-d allowed Haman to plot against the Jewish people in reaction to their seeming betrayal of Him. This disloyalty was displayed either at

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<sup>1</sup> *Orach Chaim*, 696:8

<sup>2</sup> *Megillah* 12a.

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the time the Jews bowed to an image in the days of Nebuchadnezzar or, alternately, in their enjoyment of the feast of Achashveirosh.<sup>3</sup> However, these sins did not reveal their true inner feelings, “they acted only outwardly.” G-d's anger, as well, was only superficial—He desired their repentance, not their destruction.

In an entirely different vein, hiding our faces disguises the poor among us, and spares them embarrassment when they accept the charity mandated among the day's observances. Finally, our changed attire brings to mind the happy ending of the Purim story, which includes Mordechai's promotion to a new role in the palace. “Mordechai left the king's presence clad in royal apparel of turquoise and white with a large gold crown and a robe of fine linen and purple.”<sup>4</sup>

This last connection actually leads us to a broader observation and perhaps to a new and more profound insight, cloaked in our strange dress. Like any good play, the story of Esther has its wardrobe changes. In reverse order, we find the following references to clothing:

- Before Mordechai received his own royal apparel, Haman was forced to dress Mordechai in the King's royal robe.<sup>5</sup>
- It is also noted that “Esther donned royalty”<sup>6</sup> before she visited the King to invite him to the party, where she would plead for her people.
- Upon hearing Haman's evil decree, Mordechai put on sackcloth and refused the garments that Esther sent him.<sup>7</sup>
- Esther was crowned queen in place of Vashti.<sup>8</sup>
- The story opens with a series of parties, at which Queen Vashti was killed for failing to appear wearing the royal crown (and The Emperor's New Clothes, so to speak).<sup>9</sup>
- During those same parties, King Achashveirosh donned the holy garments of the High Priest.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps there is a statement being made in all this fashion. First,

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<sup>3</sup> The significance of this will be developed further.

<sup>4</sup> *Esther* 8:15

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.* 6:1-11

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* 5:2

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* 4:1-4

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* 2:17

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* 1:11-22

<sup>10</sup> See Talmud, *Megillah* 12a.

let's analyze the actions of Achashveirosh, which, according to the Talmud, were part of a larger offense and represented his outlook on the future of the Jews. To do so we must consider the background and reason for his parties.

The prophet Jeremiah had foretold that the Jewish exile would last only seventy years, and then G-d would return his people to their land. The potential for a Divine redemption and the upheaval that might accompany it weighed heavily on the minds of the monarchs who would dominate the Jews during this exile. Adding to their insecurity was the fact that the starting point of this seventy-year period was left open to interpretation. Understandably, the kings would make their own calculations and hope for the passing of these years without incident.

Belshazzar, the last Babylonian king, miscalculated the correct starting point, and, seeing no redemption, assumed that the prophecy would not be fulfilled. In celebration, he made use of the holy vessels that had been plundered from the Temple. This was to be his last mistake. As seen in the writing on the wall, "that very night Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was slain."<sup>11</sup>

Achashveirosh, thinking that he had discovered Belshazzar's mistake, made his own calculation and set a new date for the promised redemption. When this time passed and the Jews were not redeemed, Achashveirosh celebrated his great feasts and he too brought out the vessels of the Temple and donned the holy garments. "As a punishment for his insolence the Satan came, danced among them, and killed Vashti."<sup>12</sup>

The Ramban (Nachmanides)<sup>13</sup> finds difficulty in the Talmud's account of Achashveirosh's actions.

First, how do we make sense out of Achashveirosh's thinking? If he believed that Belshazzar had truly erred and was therefore punished for his use of the Temple's vessels, he obviously believed in the prophecy. The death of Belshazzar should have only further substantiated the validity of Jeremiah's prophecy in his mind, and assured him of its ultimate fulfillment. What would have possessed Achashveirosh to rely on his new calculation and dismiss the prophecy, in-

<sup>11</sup> Daniel 5:30

<sup>12</sup> Talmud, Megillah 11b

<sup>13</sup> Commentary to the Talmud, ad loc.

stead of considering that perhaps he too had erred?

Second, how could Achashveirosh honestly say that there was no sign of redemption? Several years before, by the command of King Cyrus, Achashveirosh's predecessor, some forty thousand Jews had returned to Israel, settled its cities and begun the reconstruction of the Temple.<sup>14</sup> Granted that the work on the Temple had been halted, but clearly the Jews had indeed returned, in fulfillment of the prophecy. What was Achashveirosh's rationale in ignoring the implications of this historical and monumental event?

The Ramban explains that these two questions answer each other. Achashveirosh thought that Belshazzar was punished because at the time that he misused the vessels the prophecy was yet to be fulfilled. Belshazzar had been too quick to dismiss the possibility of a new Temple and the renewed need for these holy vessels. This moment of opportunity occurred almost immediately, as evident by the return of the tens of thousands of Jews. However, it remained to be seen to what degree this redemption was indeed to unfold. Would there be anything more than this? Most importantly, would the Temple return?

When the seventy years passed, even by Achashveirosh's reckoning, and things remained the same, he concluded that this was the complete fulfillment of the prophecy. The majority of Jews as well as their leadership remained in his lands and there was no Temple. There was not going to be a Temple, he assured himself, and he confidently brought out the Temple's vessels, exceeding even the audacity of Belshazzar, by wearing the High Priest's garments.

To expand on the Ramban's answer, we can now see that the anxiety that inspired these royal calculations was not just the potential for a Jewish relocation, but rather the possibility of a return of the Temple. This would signal a return of G-d's presence in the world and His ultimate direction and concern for its affairs—quite a frightening thought for a heathen king. The Jewish people and their Temple represented the concept of a relationship with G-d, and placed a burden of spiritual responsibility on the entire world. The exile of the Jewish people and the destruction of the Temple offered the possibility of a world free of G-d's influence. From this perspective, a return

<sup>14</sup> It was no coincidence, of course, that this "start of the redemption" occurred shortly after Belshazzar's sudden demise. There was some level of accuracy, to an extent, in his calculation. See Talmud, Megillah 12a

<sup>15</sup> Pun intended.

of the Jewish nation sans their relationship with G-d was tolerable, if not a cause for open celebration.

This brings us to the clothes.<sup>15</sup> One's attire often makes a statement about the kind of person he is or what he does; this is especially true for the Jewish people. When G-d commanded the creation of the holy garments for Aaron the High Priest, the Torah described them as being "for glory and splendor."<sup>16</sup> Wearing these clothes symbolized Aaron's close relationship to G-d, as expressed in the Temple service, and thus brought him glory and splendor.

In fact, every Jew was given a special set of crowns when he received the Torah at Mount Sinai, as explained in the Talmud.

R. Simai expounded: At the time that Israel preceded "we will do," to "we will hear," sixty myriads of ministering angels came to each and every Jew. They tied two crowns on each Jew, one corresponding to "we will do," and one corresponding to "we will hear." But when Israel sinned with the Golden Calf, one hundred twenty thousand myriads of destructive angels descended and removed the crowns.<sup>17</sup>

According to the Maharsha, these crowns symbolized the offices of priesthood and kingship, which G-d alluded to when He said at Sinai. "You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests."<sup>18</sup>

This would seem to suggest that the propriety of our wearing adorning garments would depend on our connection to G-d and our success in faithfully serving Him. Elsewhere, the Talmud expresses this idea as being axiomatic.

Rav Chisda said, "A verse is written that prohibits wearing a wedding crown after the destruction of the Temple: 'Thus says G-d, "Remove the turban and take off the crown. This [will] not [remain like] this; exalt him who is low and abase him who is high.'"<sup>19</sup>

Now what relationship does the turban of the High Priest have with a crown? Rather, it is to tell you that when the turban is on the head of the High Priest a crown may be placed on the head of any person, but once the turban disappears from the head of the High

Priest the crown disappears from the head of every person...

When G-d said to Israel, "Remove the turban and take off the crown," the angels said, "Is this punishment fitting for Israel, who preceded "we will do," to "we will hear," at Sinai?" G-d answered, "Is this not fitting for Israel, who demeaned the One Who is high, and exalted a lowly one by setting up a graven image in the Temple?"<sup>19</sup>

The etiquette as to what passes for appropriate dress for the Jew reflects his ability to fill his role as G-d's servant.

When Achashveirosh used the vessels of the Temple, he was making a statement about their obsolescence, that there was not to be another Temple. However, when he donned the garments of the High Priest, he was making a statement about the Jewish people and their relationship with G-d. No longer were these garments to be the measure of the glory and spirituality of the Jews. These were simply garments for an earthly monarch of the now earthly Jew.

It is quite ironic that the wearing of these garments brought the Satan to kill Vashti, opening the door for Esther to become queen, and returning the crown to the head of a Jew.

Ultimately, Darius, son of Esther, would give the order to complete the construction of the Temple. First, though, the Jews had to earn the return of their glory and their Temple. This is the story of Purim, the great threat of destruction unleashed by Haman and the whole-hearted repentance it inspired. This reversal was represented in Mordechai's varied clothing, from sackcloth to royal apparel. Achashveirosh, the king, was really just a pawn in G-d's plan to return His subjects to their rightful status as His kingdom of priests.

We live in times surprisingly similar to those of Mordechai and Esther, when a great percentage of the Jewish people have returned to the land of Israel after a long exile. However, we have not yet merited the return of the Temple or the clarity of purpose that comes with a close relationship with G-d. Our enemies have only multiplied; we have exchanged Haman for Hamas and others of their kind. The threat to our people is not any less.

All of this should not be lost on us when we enjoy seeing each other in our costumes on Purim, each one of us more inappropriately dressed than the next. Granted, no one can challenge Achashveirosh's misfit in the garments of the High Priest, but we too have not yet

<sup>16</sup> Exodus 28:2. These same terms are used to describe Achashveirosh's display at his great feast. On this basis, the Talmud derives the fact that he was wearing the garments of the High Priest at that feast. See note 10.

<sup>17</sup> Shabbos 88a

<sup>18</sup> Shemos 19:6

<sup>19</sup> Gittin 7a

shed the drab garb of exile. Our mundane, physical existence truly does not befit us. As the Holiday of Purim inspires us to renew our relationship with G-d, to see His presence in our world and its events, let this be our crowning moment. It is something to think about, as we await the ultimate redemption and the final wardrobe change.

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**Rabbi David Spetner**

## Sinai Revisited

When did the Jewish people accept the Torah?  
Shavu'os, right?

Not so fast. We *received* the Torah from G-d on Shavu'os, but did we really *accept* it? This question is dealt with by the Talmud (Shabbos 88a), where we are told a very startling thing. When the Jews stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, G-d had to hold the mountain over their heads in order to get them to accept the Torah, perforce! Only following the miracle of Purim did the Jews willingly accept the Torah.

What happened during the Purim story that inspired the Jews to do, of their own free will, something they were unwilling to do at Sinai?

Let's back up for a moment and look at this idea of a forced acceptance of the Torah. The Midrash is replete with praise for the Jews' bold statement of acceptance at Sinai. The people said, "*Na'aseh v'nishmah!* We will do and we will listen!" indicating their willingness to accept G-d's law sight unseen. How do we square this very positive perspective with the unflattering description of a people accepting the Torah with a "gun to their heads?"

This conflict is first noted and resolved by Midrash *Tanchuma* (Noach 3). The Midrash explains that the resolution can be found in the difference between the Written Torah and the companion Oral Torah. The Written Torah the nation boldly accepted, but the Oral Torah gave them pause.

*Chasam Sofer*<sup>1</sup> explains this difference in attitude.

The Jews at Sinai felt safe accepting the Written Torah. They felt they could not go wrong with a body of Law authored by G-d Himself. He would not demand more than they could handle and would

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Moshe Sofer (1762—1839), Responsa, *Orach Chaim* 208

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always be right and reasonable.

The Oral Torah, though, would be the province of the Sages of each generation. The people would be putting their lives and survival in the hands of mere mortals. That was more than they would risk willingly, and G-d needed to force the Oral Torah—and the authority of the Sages—upon them.

It was on Purim that the Jews finally changed their attitude and recognized that G-d had not forced upon them something that He would not ultimately guide. What happened on Purim to change their minds?

When we read the Purim story, the Jews' problems seem to begin with Mordechai's refusal to bow down to Haman, which leads the infuriated Haman to seek the annihilation of the Jewish people. And that is exactly how the Jews of that time saw it. The Talmud (Megillah 12b) reports that the Jews held their rabbinic leader, Mordechai, responsible for their plight at the hands of Haman.

The reality was otherwise. The opening episode in the Megillah is the story of King Achashveirosh's extraordinary party. The book fails to tell us, though, what the reason for celebration was. Our Sages fill in the gap and explain that the Persian Emperor was celebrating what he believed was the final defeat of the Jews. The Jews were waiting for the fulfillment of the prophecy that their expulsion from Israel would last only seventy years. Achashveirosh incorrectly believed that that deadline had passed and the destiny of G-d's people was now headed for the dustbin of history. In the spirit of anti-Semites both gone and yet unborn, this was cause for great celebration. The Jews could live in relative freedom in the Persian Empire, as long as their mission was vanquished. And so the Jews of Persia, ignoring the warnings of their sages, succumbed to the pressure of the times, and as loyal subjects, they too participated in the festivities. This trespass brought the rise of the evil Haman and the threat of his decrees.

Yet the Jews blamed Mordechai for their predicament.

The story of Purim is a story of incredible irony. What has been planned for the Jews occurs to their enemies; Mordechai replaces Haman as viceroy; Haman is hung on the very same gallows he prepared for Mordechai; and so on. The change in events may appear merely fortuitous, but the Jews saw it for what it was. They now saw G-d's hand guiding not only the events of the day, but also the inspired leadership of their people.

Mordechai had not failed them. Unmoved as he was by the influence of political convenience, he did what he knew the Torah demanded from him. The chips will fall where they may, but never anywhere that G-d does not want them to fall. The Jews now realized that when G-d placed the Oral Torah under the authority of the Sages, He was not walking away from us and leaving us in their hands without any of His involvement. Rather, He guides the Oral Torah and the leadership who maintain it.

Thus a people recently bereft of prophecy and open miracles, and exiled from their land, knew that they were not alone. G-d's Revelation had not ceased with the close of prophecy, but would continue with them, through the Oral Torah and its human guardians.

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# Harry Potter, Purim, and Drinking

What is so captivating about Harry Potter? What is so intriguing about Harry Potter that is getting grade school kids (and adults) across America to read 700-page books? Is it the fact that Harry is a regular kid who grew up in a suburb, just like you and me? Or is it the incredible imagination of the author, who has created an entirely new magical world?

I think it's both. We are drawn in because Harry is so much like us. Harry has the same types of feelings, emotions, and friends as we have. He is so similar to us that we imagine that we are Harry. Then the author takes us on an incredible ride to a magical world where we become heroes and save the world from evil.

Before we proceed there is a crucial point that must be made. In no way does Judaism look down at the use of the imagination. On the contrary, if the imagination is used properly it can be one of the best ways to bring ourselves closer to G-d. Maimonides, in *Guide to the Perplexed* (volume 2, chapter 36), says that only through perfection of the imaginative faculty could a prophet receive prophecy. The great Chasidic masters say that everything in the Torah applies to all people at all times. Thus, to say that use of the imagination is a lost art and was only possible many years ago in the age of prophecy would be sacrilegious. Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, among others, suggests that imagining the scene at Mount Sinai can be a tremendous tool in serving G-d. Try to experience in imagination the actual scene

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at Sinai. All of Israel stood at the foot of the burning mountain. There were smoke, lightning, and the booming of thunder. Then G-d revealed His glory in a cloud and spoke to His holy people. Amid thunder and lightning and the sound of the shofar G-d's glorious voice taught His people the Torah and the commandments. Picturing this scene when we sit down to learn, or upon awakening in the morning, can instill within us feelings of awe and joy.

To illustrate, there is a story told of a simple Jew. He was in the synagogue listening with the congregation to the reading of the Torah and tears were streaming down his cheeks. Afterwards an insensitive person came over to him and said, "Why are you crying so? Not only don't you understand a word of Hebrew, but you're illiterate altogether." The man answered, "That's true. But all the time that the Torah reader was chanting the holy words, I saw before me all of Mount Sinai on fire and heard the sound of a shofar, louder and louder. And I realized that the Holy One Himself, blessed be He, had come down to us, to give the Torah to His children."

Picturing the scene at Mount Sinai is just one example of using the imagination as a tool to enhance our daily service. With this new tool we can use Harry Potter to create for ourselves an inspiring image. We've proposed that what's so thrilling about Harry Potter is that we imagine ourselves as the hero. We can do that so easily because the magical world of Harry is right here. It's not a world in some far away galaxy that can only be reached in a futuristic space ship. All you need to do is go to Kings Cross, platform 9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>, and you're there. Judaism also believes that there is a magical world right here in our midst. It's a spiritual world, filled with incredible excitement. It's a world that can produce the greatest of heroes and the most evil of villains. All we need to get there is knowledge of the Torah.

Our Rabbis teach that a person must look at the world as if it's a balanced scale. One side of the scale represents good and the other evil. Every step we take has cosmic ramifications. Are we going to be Harry Potters and save the world? Or are we going to be Lord Voldemorts? This is an awesome responsibility. Picture this image: every time we do a *mitzvah*, whether it's learning Torah or just giving someone a smile, we are saving the world. We need to use our imagination to conjure up this image in our minds. Voldemort and the side of evil are about to take control, and we are faced with a test. The test is a difficult one and our evil inclination is gaining the upper hand.

But we know that if we lose this fight Voldemort will win and darkness will fall upon the world. We can not let this happen! It' up to us and only us. So we fight and we win—we do the *mitzvah*. Now it's not just any old *mitzvah*; we just saved the world from Voldemort. If we live like this though the use of our imagination our daily service can be filled with tremendous passion. Every day we can be Harry Potters who save the world from evil.

What better time to start our new outlook on the world than on Purim? We all know that there is actually a *mitzvah* to drink on Purim. If drinking is a *mitzvah*, then it can't be that our Sages just wanted us to get drunk. It must be that in some way alcohol is a means to grow spiritually. The Peasetzna Rebbe (in *Hachsharas HaAvrechim*) explains that a lowly person who drinks becomes more sinful as he becomes uninhibited. A person who is trying to grow spiritually, on the other hand, will say, "Yes, it is true that it was only through liquor that I have been excited and part of my soul has been revealed. Nevertheless, my inner being has been revealed somewhat, and I will hold on to the part that has come into the open; I will not lose control. With it I will serve G-d. Furthermore, I will not just do so with what the liquor has brought out, but through my Divine service I will bring my soul out even more, with emotion, excitement, and fiery enthusiasm." Of course, such drinking should be done in the proper environment. The traditional Purim meal is a terrific model for such drinking. The lavish Purim feast, if made together with friends who also want to grow, can be a tremendously inspiring experience. Such a meal is highlighted with words of Torah and enthusiastic singing. It's a time when people can bring out their inner spiritual longing.

This Purim, let's become the heroes. Today we don't need Haman or Lord Voldemort to remind us that there is evil in the world. We sometimes even think that the scales are leaning towards the side of evil. Every *mitzvah* we do, large or small, can tip the scale and save the world. With our enhanced knowledge of how to use imagination, and maybe a little help from the drinking, we can easily imagine the truth. We really can be the heroes who save the world. So when you see me this Purim dressed as Harry Potter, you'll know what I'll be thinking.

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**Rabbi Yehudah Bienstock**

# Haman and the Primordial Sin

The Talmud (Chullin 139b) asks, "*Haman min haTorah minayin*—where is Haman's name found in the Torah?" The question itself is puzzling. Haman lived almost a thousand years after the Torah was given at Sinai. Why should we assume that his name appears in the Torah at all?

At Creation, G-d looked into the Torah and created the world. The Torah is the blueprint for creation and every detail of creation exists only because the Torah says so. Just as a builder follows the plans drawn up by the architect, G-d first brought the Torah into being and then created the world. Since the Torah is the genetic material of the world, all aspects of existence from the beginning of time until the end are contained therein. The challenge, however, is uncovering that information.

The Talmud is not merely searching for a hint or a reference to the name of Haman in the Torah. Rather, the Talmud seeks to define his essence. If we can find where Haman is located in the Torah, we can understand his very being, how he came into being, and why he continues to exist until this very day. Haman, a descendant of Amalek, the nation whose only goal is to destroy the Jewish people, must be located in the Torah.

The Talmud finds Haman's name at the beginning of the Torah. Surprisingly, the name of Haman is found in the middle of the narrative of the sin of Adam. After Adam eats from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, G-d appears and asks him, "*Hamin ha'etz... achalta*—did you eat from the tree?" The Hebrew words *hamin* and *Haman* are spelled alike:

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*Heh, mem, nun.* Without vowels they are the same word.

This is the beginning of sin: Adam brought sin into the world. And the root of Haman in the Torah is somehow connected to the root of sin itself.

*Nefesh HaChaim* explains that prior to his sin, although Adam possessed free will, the temptation to sin was external. The Evil Inclination, as we call it, was not part of him. It was embodied in the Serpent. Although the ability to sin existed, the reality of G-d's existence was so obvious that sin had almost no appeal. When we see a policeman in our rear-view mirror the desire to run a red light dissipates quite fast; likewise, Adam perceived G-d so clearly that he had no desire to sin as we do. If we saw G-d with complete clarity, we too would feel compelled to do His will.

Adam ate from the tree because he wanted to increase his role in the world. Adam felt he was capable of much more than simply avoiding one tree. He needed a greater challenge; if he could internalize the Evil Inclination then he could perfect himself and the world through his own efforts. When Adam ate from the tree, he created *hester panim*—the Divine Presence of G-d became hidden. The lines between good and evil became blurred. What had been so clear suddenly became opaque. Mystical writers refer to the Tree of Knowledge as *ilana d'sfeika*, the Tree of Doubt. The tree combined good and evil so thoroughly that when Adam ingested the fruit he became entangled in the two. G-d was distant; things were no longer clear.

The Talmud finds the name of Haman, of Amalek, the arch-enemy of the Jewish people, in the sin of Adam *because the sin created Amalek*. Amalek represents uncertainty.

When the Jewish people left Egypt, Amalek was the first one to attack. They entered a suicidal battle against a nation that had miraculously exited Egypt. Amalek was compelled to wage this war because their very essence was threatened—when the nations of the world realized that the Torah was about to be given, they entertained thoughts of joining the Jewish people at Sinai. Although Amalek lost that battle, they won the war; they were virtually decimated, but they achieved their aim: They created doubt. The Jewish people were shown to be vulnerable, and the Torah itself no longer seemed invincible. The nations of the world now doubted whether the Torah was for them or not. Rashi offers an analogy to a tub of boiling water—the first to jump in is badly burnt, but he cools the water off. The Jewish

people could have inspired the entire world to accept the Torah, but Amalek created doubt.

That is the nature of Amalek. Does G-d exist? Is there a Divine will? Do we have to observe the Torah? Sin created a gap between reality and our perception of it. In the physical world, Amalek is the nation that has attempted to destroy us throughout history. By connecting Haman to the primordial sin, the Talmud is warning us of an even greater threat. In the spiritual world, Amalek represents uncertainty. Perhaps G-d doesn't see. Perhaps he doesn't know. Amalek is the force that blinds us from the truth.

To return to Adam's story: After Adam sins, he realizes he's naked and he hides when G-d appears. G-d asks, "Where are you?" Did Adam actually think he could hide from G-d? How is that possible? Only moments before, G-d was completely revealed to him! Through his sin, Adam became blind, confused, unable to see things clearly, to the point that he hid from the One Who sees all.

Another aspect of *hester panim*, of G-d's Presence being hidden, is that the Divine plan is beyond our grasp, beyond our scope of vision. We can no longer see the hand of G-d in the world. Difficult events in our personal lives and in world history leave us wondering, "Where is G-d?" or "How could such tragedies take place?"

The Talmud (Tractate Megillah) states, "One who reads [the chapters of] the Megillah (the story of Purim) out of sequence has not fulfilled his obligation." Starting from the beginning of the Megillah, those events seem quite random. Achashveirosh makes a party. He executes his wife. Esther becomes queen. Mordechai saves the king's life. These events through a narrow scope seem random, not Divinely orchestrated. Only when we reach the end of the Megillah do we realize that all the events leading up to that point were all part of a Divine plan; everything had a purpose and a reason. It was not simply a coincidence.

The Talmud is teaching us that our duty is *not* to look to the end of the story to see the hand of G-d; rather, we must read the Megillah and see the Divine hand in every event, good and bad. People often write their memoirs at the end of their lives. Only in retrospect can they see how everything worked out and how all the pieces of the puzzle fit. The Megillah challenges us to see G-d *throughout* our lives as a reality, as a guide. In good and bad times He is guiding us to our individual and collective destinies.

Amalek represents doubt. The message of Purim is to rise above that doubt, to make G-d a reality. Adam brought Amalek into existence, but we sustain him. Amalek's ideology exists in our culture today. Nothing is absolute; everything is mere chance. Our goal, however, is to find G-d, to uncover His presence and to make Him a part of our lives.

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**Rabbi Yehiel M. Kalish**

# The Greatest of all Miracles

What will be at the end of days? What will be when the Moshiach (the Messiah) comes? These are questions that I am sure everyone at one point during his or her lifetime has wondered about. Who doesn't want to know what life will be like when Moshiach comes? Since our youth we have been told stories of the miraculous and cataclysmic events that will take place prior to his coming. And every day, three times a day, we ask for G-d to send Moshiach speedily in our days. Is our curiosity not aroused?

This essay will not attempt to answer these questions, yet it is because of these questions and the feelings that come with them, that I am attracted to the following Midrash and its interpretation.

In Esther 9:28, the end of the verse reads: "...These days of Purim will never depart from among the Jews, and their memory will never depart from their children." The Midrash on Proverbs interprets this verse as follows. "[This pasuk] comes to teach us that even if all other festivals were to be discontinued [after Moshiach comes], the days of Purim will never be discontinued."

This is surprising. Is it possible that all the other holidays, such as Passover, Shavuot or Sukkot, will be discontinued? If so, what is so special about Purim? Why will Purim remain?

Before answering these questions, should we just assume the Midrash is speaking homiletically, and requires a different angle in interpretation?

To dispel that last thought, let me share with you the words of the

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As this booklet goes to press, Cincinnati-raised **Rabbi Yehiel Kalish** is preparing for his newly-accepted position as Midwest Director of Agudath Israel of America. In his two-and-a-half years as a staff scholar, Rabbi Kalish gave classes on the weekly Torah portion and was a popular instructor in our Yesodei Hatorah program. An accomplished *chazzan*, he also directed a local boys' choir.

Rambam (Maimonides). The Rambam writes in his famous legal work, *Yad Hachazaka* (Hilchos Megilla 2:18), “Even though the memory of all our troubles will be discontinued (after Moshiach comes)—as Isaiah (65:16) stated, ‘For the earlier travails will have been forgotten and concealed from My eyes—’ the days of Purim will never be discontinued.”

This is a major statement. Why is it that the days of Purim will never be discontinued? How do we understand the Rambam and Midrash?

The *Torah Temimah*, quoting his father, the author of *Aruch HaShulchan*, provides us with an amazing answer—one that borders on homiletics but ultimately has legal ramifications.

The *Torah Temimah* explains that the intention of the Midrash is as follows. The miracle of our salvation on Purim was different in substance than any other miracle, be it the miracle of the Exodus or the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, or even the Clouds of Glory that followed and protected us in the wilderness for forty years. What is the difference? All the miracles associated with Passover, Shavuot, and Succos were *revealed* miracles. There can be no doubt whatsoever of their reality. There is no doubt that they took place and there is no doubt as to the miraculous nature of those events. On the other hand, the miracle of Purim happened in a natural way, even though the events leading to our salvation came from G-d. A person who has no faith in G-d could say, “It just so happened that Achashveirosh couldn’t sleep. Mordechai happened to be in the right place at the right time when he overheard Bigsan and Teresh plotting to kill the king, and it so happened Queen Esther happened to be the right girl for the right man.”

Yes, everything can be explained according to a natural sequence of events. Therefore the Midrash and the Rambam teach us the following, extremely important idea: *Even if all miracles of a revealed nature were to be discontinued (after the coming of Moshiach), miracles which are part of the natural order, which worked within the parameters of nature—hidden miracles—those miracles will never be discontinued.* As anyone can see from the study of civilized history in general, and the history of the Jewish people in particular, G-d runs the world. Hidden miracles happen every day.

Thus, to reiterate, when the Midrash in Mishlei tells us that the days of Purim will never be discontinued, it doesn’t mean to cast as-

persions on any festival in the Torah. No festival will be discontinued, G-d forbid. To quote the Jerusalem Talmud (Megilla 1:5), “The Moshiach will not change our religion in any way. All of the commandments will be binding in the Messianic Era. Nothing will be added to or subtracted from the Torah.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, when the Midrash in Mishlei, based on the pasuk in Esther, says that even if the other festivals were to be discontinued the days of Purim would not, it means that even if the miracles commemorated by Passover, Shavuot and Succos—meaning revealed miracles—were to be discontinued, the miracle of Purim—the hidden miracles G-d performs every day—will never be discontinued. G-d will always continue performing miracles through nature, day after day, as anyone with a basic knowledge of Jewish history can attest—how is it, if not for the miracles that G-d performs for us daily, that the Jewish people could have survived all that has been brought against it? This is the message of the Midrash and the Rambam.

I think it is important now to bring to your attention the words of Rabbi Yaakov Emden. The following quote has been taken from his introduction to his commentary on the prayer book.

Anyone who looks closely at our history or our position in this world—a people who have been dispersed, like sheep that have been scattered... After all that has happened to us over the last couple thousands of years—[can see that] there is no people that has been persecuted or pursued as we have been. How many are our enemies, who have risen up against us from our earliest years as a people to destroy us or to uproot us? Look at all the great empires that have risen to destroy us. They have been lost. But we, who cling to the Holy One, blessed be He, we are all alive today. We have not lost throughout the entire period of our exile even one letter of our Torah. And all the words of our Rabbis are still alive, as well. What will the wise philosopher say to that? Is it just an accident that this has happened so? By the life of my soul, when I reflect on these miracles, they are greater than all the miracles that G-d performed for our ancestors in Egypt, in the wilderness, and at Har Sinai! And the longer we are in exile, the more obvious these miracles become.

We see, according to Rabbi Emden, that no miracle that has ever

<sup>1</sup> The reader is encouraged to see *Maharatz Chios*, Niddah 61b, and *Handbook of Jewish Thought* by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan (volume 2, page 378).

been performed can compare to the miracle of Jewish survival, the greatest of all “hidden” miracles. Jewish survival is a concept even men like John Adams and Mark Twain have tried (and failed) to understand. Let me share with you the words of Mr. Twain, from his famous essay, “Concerning the Jews.” He wrote:

If the statistics are right, the Jews constitute but one percent of the human race. It suggests a nebulous dim puff of star dust lost in the blaze of the Milky Way. Properly the Jew ought hardly to be heard of; but he is heard of, has always been heard of. He is as prominent on the planet as any other people, and his commercial importance is extravagantly out of proportion to the smallness of his bulk. His contributions to the world’s list of great names in literature, science, art, music, finance, medicine, and abstruse learning, are also way out of proportion to the weakness of his numbers. He has made a marvelous fight in this world, in all the ages; and has done it with his hands tied behind him. He could be vain of himself, and be excused for it. The Egyptian, the Babylonian, and the Persian rose, filled the planet with sound and splendor, then faded to dream-stuff and passed away; the Greek and the Roman followed, and made a vast noise, and they are gone; other peoples have sprung up and held their torch high for a time, but it burned out, and they sit in twilight now, or have vanished. The Jew saw them all, beat them all, and is now what he always was, exhibiting no decadence, no infirmities of age, no weakening of his parts, no slowing of his energies, no dulling of his alert and aggressive mind. All things are mortal but the Jew; all other forces pass, but he remains. What is the secret of his immortality?

We know the answer to this question, the secret of our immortality. It really is no secret. Commitment to the Torah and its laws have always been our connection with the Almighty. G-d has given us the Torah to be a guide, and He has sent us the Sages to decipher this guide—sages who have given their lives and forsaken all material pleasure to understand G-d’s laws and to teach them to His people.

During the era when the story of Purim took place, the Jews began to lose their connection with the Almighty, because of their loss of connection with His Torah. When the evil Haman arose, together with the evil Achashveirosh, to destroy us, we woke up.<sup>2</sup> We began to fast, pray, and repent. The Megillah tells us (Esther 9:27) that “the Jews confirmed and undertook upon themselves.” Our Rabbis inter-

pret this phrase to mean that we accepted the laws of the Torah upon ourselves, anew. Specifically, we reaffirmed our commitment to the Oral Law. This is what the Almighty wanted—and what He still wants.

We have merited and continue to merit this miracle of Jewish survival because of our commitment to acting as Jews. And the place to see how to act as a Jew is the Torah, written and oral. May it be the will of the Almighty to bring upon us the Messianic Era we have been longing for. In the interim, we should commit ourselves to His Torah—for then we will continue to see the greatest miracle of all time: our survival as a people.

Have a happy and healthy Purim!

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<sup>2</sup> As Rabbi Moshe Sherer, of blessed memory, used to say, “Someone once said, ‘Jews are like teabags. You only see their strength when they get into hot water.’” (Rabbi Sherer would then add the following: “Don’t wait for hot water! Let’s work together, now!”)

# Vashti's Tail and a Hovering Mountain

## An Introduction to the Mystique of Midrash

At the beginning of the Megillah, the drunken king Achashveirosh issued the ultimate chauvinist decree—Vashti, his queen, was to appear before his numerous guests wearing nothing but her natural beauty. Her refusal led to her demise.

The Midrash questions her non-compliance. Given the probable ramifications of defying the emperor, coupled with her general immodesty,<sup>1</sup> why, in fact did she refuse? The Midrash presents two theories, but we will focus on the more curious of the two—Vashti's tail! “Gabriel (the angel) came and affixed a tail to her.”

Many who have previously encountered this Midrash have probably relegated it to the realm of folklore. Those who have never heard this intriguing piece of royal trivia are probably guessing that this essay is some form of Purim humor. But Midrash is neither lore nor humor, and the sages had better things to do than contrive whimsical answers to their concerns. How are we to view this and other seemingly nonsensical comments in the Talmud and Midrash?

Rambam (Maimonides) addresses this issue in the introduction to his commentary on the Mishnah. He presents two reasons for seemingly fantastic metaphors in Talmudic literature.

The first is that many matters addressed by the sages fall into the realm of “secrets” that are not fit for all audiences. Originally these

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<sup>1</sup> See Talmud, Megillah 12b.

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matters were only taught orally, to exclusive students. When putting these messages into written form, an encoding of sorts was utilized to mask the ultimate meaning from any readers other than those qualified to decipher the code. With this reason alone, it would seem to be presumptuous for us to try deciphering our passage.

However, Rambam presents a second explanation. The Sages employed a technique of using allegories to include the unlearned, unsophisticated among those who would be attentive to and recall the message. More advanced students would quickly decipher the lesson; the shockingly unusual metaphors would grab the attention of the other students and the vivid imagery would be easily remembered. Eventually, after developing proper understanding and sophistication, these students would understand the actual meanings, as well.<sup>2</sup>

This latter explanation demands that those of us who wish to rise beyond the “unsophisticated” search for some meaning in the cryptic passages of the Talmud. As Rambam writes, “Upon encountering analogies whose meanings are very distant, one should be pained by not understanding the matter—for the truest of ideas [as expressed in these messages] have become so foreign to him.”

With this in mind, it becomes our task to search for at least some meaning in these curious words.

The great mystic and philosopher, Rabbi Yehudah Loewy, better known as the Maharal of Prague gives us a foundation upon which to build an understanding.<sup>3</sup>

What is a tail? As the Maharal describes, a tail is to some degree added baggage. Many animals glean little if any clear benefit from this additional appendage. And certainly, if affixed to a human, a tail would serve to weigh him down, to slow movement, to hinder progress. The natural laziness we often find ourselves fighting would have added advantage if we were to suddenly be burdened by a tail. That, says the Maharal, is what Vashti experienced.

G-d was setting the stage for Esther's entry. With Achashveirosh drunk and eager to be seen as an all-powerful monarch, Vashti's future was in a delicate balance. Her cruel abuse of young girls<sup>4</sup> war-

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<sup>2</sup> This nonliteral approach is not limited to the “rationalists.” Maharal (*Be'er Hagolah*, Be'er 4—p. 51 in standard edition) and *Ben Yehoyada* (commentary to Eruvin 63a) provide fascinating insight on this matter, as well.

<sup>3</sup> Maharal in *Ohr Chodosh*.

<sup>4</sup> Described in Megillah 12b.

ranted Divine punishment. Gabriel, acting as messenger of G-d, tipped the scales by boosting Vashti's inertia. She remained "unmotivated;" she would ride the tide—unsuccessfully, of course, as she soon discovered.

Having seen a brief example of the Maharal's approach to Midrash, let us turn to another Purim-related example. The following passage and interpretation is not only fascinating but also lends important perspective on one of the fundamentals of Jewish outlook.

"And they stood at the base (literally, at the *underside*) of the mountain." This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, held the mountain over them like an overturned vat and He said to them, "If you accept the Torah, fine; but if not, there will be your burial..." Nevertheless, they accepted it (the Torah) again in the days of Achashveirosh. (Talmud, Shabbos 88a)

A number of questions immediately strike the reader. The hovering mountain and the connection to the Purim story are among the most striking. But before dealing with those issues we must address a more fundamental concern. Hadn't the Jewish people already displayed the ultimate show of loyalty and dedication to the Torah with their proclamation, "*Na'aseh v'nishma*—we will do and we will listen?" Why was *any* coercion necessary after that declaration?

Many commentators deal with this concern, but we will once again focus on the approach of the Maharal.<sup>5</sup> His insights will resolve the coercion issue and our difficulty in accepting the hovering mountain. They will also shed light on the connection between Sinai and Purim, providing us with a more profound understanding of the significance of this mysterious holiday.

Maharal suggests that coercion through a hovering mountain is a metaphor for a far more subtle, though perhaps much more potent, coercion. To better understand the metaphor, some visualization is called for. Imagine yourself a member of the Jewish people standing at Sinai. Think back over your past year. A new leader emerged, warning that G-d would punish Pharaoh and Egypt unless you were freed. The threat was ignored. You watched as your Egyptian oppressors suffered a series of devastating plagues. Spared from the suffering that surrounded you, it became rapidly evident that G-d was in full control of all aspects of Creation and that He was manipulating them to

<sup>5</sup> *Chiddushei Aggados*, ad loc.

avenge the injustices you had suffered. Apparently, G-d really cared about you. Following this came the elation of freedom. With recognizable Divine protection, you traveled toward Sinai. G-d split the sea for you, destroyed your pursuers with those very waters, and provided you with their jewels. G-d sustained you with miraculous food and water and shelter. Upon your arrival at Sinai, you experienced fantastic displays of G-d's Presence.

And then G-d posed the question: "Do you want My Torah?" Would "no" have been a reasonable option?

The "yes" was so reflexive, explains the Maharal, that it was not a matter of choice. The coercion described through the metaphor of a hovering mountain is the experience at, and leading up to, the mountain. We had been, in a sense, robbed of our free choice. Why G-d presented the Torah in this fashion is beyond the scope of our discussion, but the reality is that He did—and as such there was a limitation to the notion of our voluntary acceptance.

Until Purim, that is.

Throughout the First Temple era, we were witnesses to great manifestations of G-d's involvement in our world and in our lives. Miraculous conquest, multitudes of prophets in each generation, and ten miracles that could be witnessed regularly in the temple in Yerushalayim, all served to keep G-d's Presence readily apparent.

But then we found ourselves crushed by a foreign power, expelled from our land. We had no prophets to relate G-d's messages to us, no dramatic miracles to remind us of G-d's involvement in our world and our lives. Even as the salvation of Purim brought us a collective sigh of relief, there was no particular event or dramatic miracle to which one could point one's finger and proclaim, "*This is the hand of Hashem.*"

We could have easily dismissed the significance of the Purim story with *laissez faire* remarks—"the right person at the right time," or "an incredible combination of coincidences." Thankfully, we chose to recognize that it was far more than that. We looked through the dark veil of "circumstance" and recognized G-d's "pulling of the strings." We rededicated ourselves to G-d and His Torah. This time, our acceptance was truly a matter of choice.

As we celebrate the Purim holiday, let us utilize our free will to dedicate ourselves to ever-more sophisticated understanding and appreciation of Torah.

# A Time to Give

## Why are we so generous on Purim?

You have to see Purim in Brooklyn to believe it. That's not to say that Purim can't be enjoyed elsewhere—but New York is in many ways a city of extremes.

On Purim night in the more affluent Jewish neighborhoods, it's faster to walk than to drive. The streets are filled with vans and stretch limos, carrying costumed groups of yeshiva students from door to door. In countless dining rooms, drinks are being poured and refreshments served, while check after check is written out and handed to the yeshiva boys, who are collecting charity—for their schools, for widows, for indigent patients, brides, grooms, and families.

Meanwhile, packages of food are being assembled and wrapped, some of them too large to rest securely on anything smaller than a kitchen table. Tomorrow afternoon the streets will again fill up, this time with station wagons and minivans, carrying the parents and siblings of the boys who are out tonight, delivering these packages to their friends.

Even in smaller Jewish communities, people spend a good part of the day giving and getting. The amount of food and money changing hands on Purim is staggering. One has to ask, what is the point? Is this a Jewish take on economic stimulus?

We should begin by explaining that two of the four *mitzvos* of Purim<sup>1</sup> involve giving things away. They are *mishlo'ach manos*, the giving of two portions of food or drink to at least one person, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the Introduction for a brief but more comprehensive outline of Purim and its observance.

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*matanos l'evyonim*, gifts to at least two poor people. But why is this so?

And why is this only true of Purim? No other Jewish holiday involves sharing with others the way that Purim does.

It's true that there is a *mitzvah* to include the poor when we celebrate the festivals of Passover, Shavu'os, and Sukkos. But that is just part of the greater obligation to enjoy the festivals.<sup>2</sup>

You shall rejoice in your festival—you, your son and daughter, your slave and your maidservant, the Levite and the proselyte, the orphan and the widow in your cities. (Deuteronomy 16:14)

Only on Purim do we find an obligation to give which exists outside of all other *mitzvos* of the day. Why?

The Vilna Ga'on ("the Gra") sees these gifts as part of a formula which encompasses all of the *mitzvos* of Purim combined. He says that we are celebrating our salvation from the four assaults that Haman mounted on the Jews.

Letters were sent by post to all the king's provinces, to destroy (*l'hashmid*), to slay (*laharog*), and to cause to perish (*ul'abed*) all Jews... and to take their spoils. (Esther 3:13)

The Gra explains that Jewish mystical writings divide man into four components—*nefesh*, *ru'ach*, *neschama*, and *kinyan*. Man's *nefesh* is his life force, which manifests itself in the pursuit of basic physical wants and pleasures; animals have a *nefesh*, as well. *Ru'ach*, the spirit, is embodied in man's emotions. The *neschama*, the soul, gives man spirituality and the potential for holiness. The fourth component, *kinyan*, is man's worldly possessions; its name means "acquisitions."

According to the Vilna Ga'on, Haman's four expressions of violence were aimed at the Jews in totality—their bodies, minds, souls, and belongings. When G-d then saved us from Haman, Mordechai and the Sages felt it appropriate to celebrate and express our gratitude with each of these components, as well. The festive meal indulges the body. The joy of Purim gladdens the mind. Reading and listening to the Megillah allow our souls to participate in the fulfillment of a ritual *mitzvah*. By giving charity and sending gifts of food,<sup>3</sup> we use our belongings to acknowledge G-d's kindness.

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<sup>2</sup> Mitzvah 488, as counted by *Sefer Hachinnuch*.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that in relating the observances of Purim to Haman's threats, the

Let's take a step backward, though. If we really want to understand *mishlo'ach manos* and *matanos l'evyonim*, we should start by looking at the words of the Megillah, the source of all of the laws of Purim.

The observance of Purim is first described in Esther 9:19.

Therefore the Jews of the villages, who dwell in the unwallied towns, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and a festival, and of sending portions of food one to another.

Mordechai later (9:21-22) codified the holiday and wrote letters to the Jewish communities of Persia, commanding them—

To observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly—the days in which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned for them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a festival—that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending portions of food one to another, and gifts to the poor.

Notice that only the initial description calls Purim a “festival,” and that gifts to the poor weren't formalized until Mordechai's decree. Why are there differences between the first outline of Purim and the second? Why was *mishlo'ach manos* a given, so to speak? Why weren't gifts to the poor initially included in the proceedings?

*Megillas Sesarim*<sup>4</sup> offers two theories.

His first explanation is that verse 19 reflects the initial, spontaneous celebration of Purim, instigated by the people. Verses 21 and 22, on the other hand, represent Mordechai's perspective on the miracle of Purim and the appropriate way to commemorate it.

Popular wisdom, it seems, maintained that Haman's rise to power and his threats against the Jews came about because the Jews had participated in Achashveirosh's feast.<sup>5</sup> However, the Jews had repented

Gra only mentions gifts to the poor—not *mishlo'ach manos*. However, in his commentary to Esther 8:19, the Vilna Gaon explains *mishlo'ach manos* by referring the reader to the interpretation quoted here. Apparently, the Gra groups *matanos l'evyonim* and *mishlo'ach manos* together, as ways of celebrating the miracles of Purim with our possessions.

<sup>4</sup> A commentary on the Megillah by Rabbi Yaakov b. Yaakov Moshe Lorberbaum, of Lissa, Poland (1760—1832).

<sup>5</sup> Described in Esther, chapter 1

for that sin and earned G-d's salvation. Now, there is a principle in Judaism that when a sinner repents, G-d considers his misdeeds to have been a source of merit, a springboard upon which the recalcitrant sinner has risen to a greater level of spirituality. Therefore the people felt that, in retrospect, the whole affair of Achashveirosh's party was something to celebrate—which they did, with feasts and happiness.

The Jews at that time also assumed that their redemption from Haman represented the beginning of the ultimate salvation, which would culminate with the coming of the Messiah—so they declared a holiday.

As far as gift-giving goes, the people realized that Haman had only been able to threaten the Jews because of a lack of Jewish unity—as Haman himself had told Achashveirosh, the Jews were “a scattered and divided people.” Haman was a descendant of Amalek, who thrived on dissent and confusion.

The episode of the royal festivities contributed to this problem also. To begin with, the Jews had been divided over the decision to participate in Achashveirosh's party. When some Jews gave in and did attend, they became objects of scorn. Jews, who were ostensibly more religious, alienated their brethren instead of reaching out to those who had been weak in the face of political pressure.

During the three days of repentance which Esther had imposed on the Jews, the people had come to regret the divide which had fallen on their community. The resulting *rapprochement* brought the Jews closer both to each other and to G-d.

Now, to reinforce that unity, they gave gifts to each other.

Mordechai agreed, in principle, that discord had weakened the Jews, and that it was appropriate on Purim to remind ourselves of the importance of unity by giving *mishlo'ach manos*. But Mordechai disagreed with the people on two points. First, he saw (correctly) no evidence that a Messianic redemption was imminent. Second, he felt that the primary sin of the Jews had not been their participation in Achashveirosh's celebration; rather, it had been when they bowed down to an idol in the time of Nevuchadnezzar.<sup>6</sup>

Mordechai suspected that G-d had saved the Jews in mercy, that

<sup>6</sup> Talmud, Megillah 12a, as understood by Rashi and Maharsha. Nevuchadnezzar's idol is described in Daniel, chapter 3.

the Jews hadn't really deserved it. He also knew that charity atones for the sin of dishonoring G-d. So he downgraded Purim from the status of a festival to that of a minor holiday, and he instituted the *mitzvah of matanos l'evyonim*.

A second explanation suggested by *Megillas Sesarim* is that the initial observance of Purim reflected Mordechai's perception of what the day should be; when Mordechai codified the holiday later in a different way, he was following the opinion of his fellow Sages.

Mordechai felt that the real danger that had hovered over the Jews of his time had been that of assimilation and spiritual decay. Following that logic, *the people's eventual repentance was itself their salvation*. Haman's threat and his eventual downfall were only G-d's means of bringing about that miraculous outcome.

Such a spiritual renaissance deserved to be commemorated with a *yom tov*, a full-fledged, spiritually oriented festival, with all of the obligations and restrictions common to Passover, Shavu'os, and Sukkos. (That would presumably mean including the underprivileged in the festivities, so a separate *mitzvah of matanos l'evyonim* would be redundant.)

However, Mordechai saw one distinction between the miracles of Purim and those which led to the festivals given in the Torah—whereas the miracles of the Exodus and the Revelation on Mount Sinai were a gift from G-d, the events of Purim were brought about by the repentance of the Jews themselves and their subsequent reacceptance of the Torah.<sup>7</sup> Therefore Mordechai thought it appropriate that the Jews should express gratitude *to each other* in a new and special way: by giving gifts of food.

He required that at least two portions of food be given, because the Jews had helped each other in two ways. One was by repenting; if even one individual completely repents, G-d is willing to forgive the entire world.<sup>8</sup> The other way was by collectively renewing their commitment to follow the Torah. *Megilas Sesarim* explains that there is a synergy in a group that performs a *mitzvah* together. Thus *mishlo'ach manos* is meant to be *two* gestures of gratitude, not one.

On the other hand, the Sages of that time believed that the threat to the Jews, as well as their salvation, had primarily been physical. By

<sup>7</sup> See "Sinai Revisited," p. 21, and "Vashti's Tail and a Hovering Mountain," p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Talmud, Yoma 87

repenting, the Jews had earned a miraculous, physical salvation. This meant that there was no need for the spiritual observances of a full-blown festival. The most appropriate way to reinforce the lesson of Purim—that allegiance to G-d and His Torah are our ticket to physical safety—would be by giving *matanos l'evyonim*. "Tzedaka tatzil mimaves; charity saves one from death."<sup>9</sup>

But why the requirement to give charity to two parties? Because a Jew is not allowed to reserve all his charity for one person—our Sages teach us that doing so brings hunger to the world.<sup>10</sup>

After all is said and done, we see that there really is a connection between acts of magnanimity and the various themes of Purim.

To sum up:

*Mishlo'ach manos* is a gesture of gratitude to G-d, made with our material possessions. It is also an attempt to unify our communities and to show our friends how much we appreciate them.

*Matanos l'evyonim* remind us that our people has survived its long and often difficult history because of its dedication to serving G-d—and that our physical well-being even today depends on our spiritual well-being. In distributing this charity we are also encouraged to reach out to all of the underprivileged, and not just to our favorite "poster children," so to speak.

Now we have some ideas that we can keep in mind as we make our contributions to the Purim economy. As it turns out, it is money well-spent.

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<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 10:2.

<sup>10</sup> Talmud, Eruvin 63a. The Talmud gives the example of King David, who gave all of his tithes to one priest; the result was a famine, described in II Samuel 21. According to the commentary *Iyun Yaakov*, this hunger is a punishment for depriving other paupers of a livelihood.

# Eat, Drink and Be Merry?

As is the case with many Jewish Holidays, eating on Purim is not an interlude in the day's events; one of the many *mitzvos* of Purim is the *se'uda*, or festive meal. The reason put forth by the Rabbis why this is so is that Haman, the villain of the Purim story, was out to destroy not only the Jewish soul, but the body as well—his aim was genocide. This physical threat, say the Rabbis, requires a response in kind: make a *se'uda*, engage in your material needs.

This would seem fine and good on the surface, but if we examine closely the circumstances which led to the harsh decrees imposed by Haman we'll find a major difficulty. The Midrash tells us Haman, in order to execute his "final solution," went to King Achashveirosh and prevailed upon him to invite the Jews of Shushan to attend a festive meal, hoping to entice the Jews to sin and to distance them from their faith. In addition to the wine that was to be served (all kosher of course), non-Jewish women would be solicited to seduce the Jewish men. Mordechai, as leader of the Jews, realized immediately Haman's ulterior motives, and publicly announced that no one was to heed the king's request. In defiance of Mordechai, eighteen thousand five hundred attended the feast, became intoxicated, and succumbed to temptation. It was because of this, the Midrash continues, that Heaven allowed Haman's evil wish to be brought to fruition. This being so, how can we commemorate the eventual *teshuvah* and victory of the Jews of Shushan with a festive meal, the very circumstance which placed the Jews in a position of danger in the first place?

To understand why a *se'uda* on Purim could possibly be appropri-

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ate, we must look deeper into the nature of the sin of the Jews. As we stated, the Jews attended Achashveirosh's feast at the king's own behest. Had they refused to attend, they asserted to Mordechai, they would have been taken with force. As such, they felt they shouldn't be held responsible for the ensuing debacle. Because they mitigated the severity of their actions by claiming they were victims of circumstance, they didn't feel that *teshuvah* (repentance) was necessary to any significant degree.

So was it only this that so angered G-d? Surely there was *some* merit to the defense the Jews of Shushan put forth. True, free of guilt they weren't, but did their actions warrant a decree of extermination for the entire people? Surely it would seem the punishment was in excess of the crime! Certainly there must have been some greater trespass of Divine will that our ancestors were guilty of that made the ensuing decree so severe.

In the second book of Kings we are told that the prophet Elisha, during his travels, always made a point of stopping to eat at the home of a certain Shunammite woman. The commentators explain that he did this because he sensed in his hostess a purity of intent; no ulterior motives were behind this woman's kindness, simply the desire to give to her fellow Jew. The Talmud sums up this idea: "The goodness of the righteous is appreciated by the righteous who benefit."

The opposite is true of the kindness the wicked bestow on the righteous; the insincere and evil intent in their actions is anathema to the spiritually sensitive soul. With this idea we can grasp a deeper appreciation of what it was about the behavior of the Jews of Shushan that so angered G-d. Knowing that Haman's intent, in inviting them to participate in King Achashveirosh's feast, was to break their connection to G-d, they should have felt, while attending the festivities, like captives of the king—forced to eat and drink that which was disgusting to them.

However, we are told, this was not case—the Jews derived pleasure from their participation. We are told in the Megillah that Achashveirosh initially made a *se'uda* for his kingdom which lasted one hundred and eighty days. The *Midrash* tells us that this period of rejoicing ended on the third day of the Jewish month of *Tishrei*, just after Rosh Hashanah. To this rejoicing Achashveirosh added another seven-day feast for the residents of Shushan. The seventh of these days was therefore the tenth of *Tishrei*, Yom Kippur. So consumed by the fes-

tivities were those Jews that attended that they were even able to eat, drink, and make merry on the holiest day of the Jewish calendar.

We see, therefore, that the significance of the Jews' behavior at Achashveirosh's party was not simply what they did, but what it revealed about where they were, spiritually. By making merry with the king, choosing sensual pleasure over that which made sense spiritually, the Jews of Shushan revealed that they had lost sight, to some extent, of the Divine mission of the Jew in this world—specifically, to make the spiritual more manifest. Through the ensuing decree that eventually brought the Jews to *teshuvah*, the Jews were able to reestablish their true priorities.

If the Jews of Shushan sinned by engrossing themselves too much in the physical, then our keeping physicality in perspective would clearly be a rectification of our ancestor's misdeeds. Does that mean that a proper commemoration of Purim should shun our connection to the mundane by isolating ourselves and fasting?

We know that while the Torah on the one hand calls an individual who accepts upon himself the Nazirite vow (to abstain from certain aspects of physicality) holy, he is nevertheless required to bring a sacrifice of atonement. By cutting himself off from the mundane, the Nazir has to some extent admitted defeat. He is saying his desires are too powerful, that in order to avoid becoming too engrossed he must shun any involvement in physicality. Even greater than the Nazir is the individual who can partake in the mundane and not become spiritually desensitized.

This is why a *se'uda* on Purim is the necessary response to the sin of the Jews of Shushan. By engaging in a festive meal that is infused with holiness and Torah, one that can strengthen our connection to Hashem, we are showing that our “indulging” in the physical world doesn't run in contradiction to what we know is right, but rather confirms it. By not shying away from battle with our physical inclination, we have the ability on Purim to become holier than even the Nazir. By indulging and not losing sight of the higher meaning of life we emerge victorious, actually fulfilling the Divine Will on a higher plane, elevating even the mundane to be a vessel for the further manifestation of G-d in this world.

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**Rabbi Zev Weiner**

# Happiness

## It's More than Meets the Eye

When the month of Adar begins, we increase our level of happiness. (Taanis 29a)

By this time of year, this phrase is most likely hanging in every Jewish day school around the country.

Adar represents the last month of the Jewish calendar.<sup>1</sup> Why now, of all months, have our Sages given us this imperative?

It's fair to assume that Purim holds the answer to our question. Found smack in the middle of Adar, Purim is our address for happiness. Whether you like candy, food, enthusiastic dancing, or an assortment of alcoholic beverage Purim has it all. Growing up, I always looked forward to getting dressed up and delivering *mishlo'ach manos* (gifts of food) with my parents. Purim is a very jubilant time.

Having stated the obvious, I find myself with lingering questions. Is this what our Sages meant by “increasing our happiness?” How can these temporary pleasures alter our emotional state, allowing our happiness to increase? What's more, if this is in fact the only happiness to be found in Adar and Purim, how can we celebrate in view of current events? We find ourselves surrounded by tragedy both on a global level, and more personally on a national level. We, the Jewish nation, are suffering terribly in Israel and there is no resolution in sight.

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<sup>1</sup> Even though we think of the Jewish New Year as taking place in the month of Tishrei (which falls in September or October), we count our months from Nissan (March or April). Nissan is the month in which we were taken out of Egypt. See Exodus 12:2, which states this point clearly.

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I would like to suggest that the answers to these questions are found in the Megillah. Let's investigate the matter so that we can understand what our Sages meant by their statement, and how crucial a role it must play in our lives.

The third chapter of Megillas Esther opens with a very cryptic statement:

After these things, King Achashveirosh promoted Haman, the son of Hammedassa the Agagite, and advanced him; he set his seat above all the officers who were with him. (Esther 3:1)

Clearly the verse is telling us of Haman's appointment to high office by King Achashveirosh. What is unclear is the beginning of the verse, which says, "After these things..." What occurrences is the Megillah referring to, and of what significance do they warrant mention now?

The Talmud is bothered by this juxtaposition, and makes a point of explaining what was going on.

Rava said: Only after the Holy One, Blessed be He, created a remedy for the affliction did He send the affliction—for Reish Lakish said, "The Holy One, Blessed be He, does not smite Israel unless He has created a remedy for them beforehand, as it says (Hosea 7:4), "When I heal Israel, then the iniquity of Ephraim will be revealed." (Megillah 13b)

So that we can fully understand this passage, let's make a quick review of the historical events that led up to Haman's appointment. We find that the Megillah opens describing a great feast that took place in the king's court. At this party Achashveirosh, frustrated with his wife's obstinace, agreed to have her burned at the stake.<sup>2</sup> Feeling the loss, he made a nationwide search for a suitable replacement for Queen Vashti. Of all the girls in the land, Esther—a Jewess and the niece of Mordechai—was chosen to wear the crown. Since Esther was found in the custody of Mordechai, Achashveirosh awarded him a position in the his court. Outraged by this appointment,<sup>3</sup> two officers plotted to assassinate the king. It was Mordechai who thwarted this sinister plot, by sending the warning to Queen Esther. Exactly at this point, the Megillah tells us that Haman ascended to high office.

<sup>2</sup> *The Torah Anthology* (English translation of *Me'am Lo'ez*), p. 45

<sup>3</sup> See *Malbim*, commentary to Esther 2:21

This marked the beginning of our troubles, as Haman was clearly bent on Jewish liquidation.

We all know the end of the Purim story, and how we were saved. The seeds for that salvation were planted within these events. Each nuance was necessary to bring about a complete victory over Haman. The Talmud is teaching us that it was G-d who prepared it all before Haman's ascension. It is for this lesson that we begin the third chapter with the phrase "After these things..."

*Chayei Olam*, a commentary by the Steipler Gaon (Rabbi Yaakov Yisroel Kanievsky, of blessed memory) takes this idea one step further.<sup>4</sup> In doing so it leaves us with a powerful insight into our lives. It says, do not think that only Esther's generation was deserving of such heavenly intervention; rather, this concept applies to all Jews at all times. Rabbi Kanievsky cites a proof from the Torah that demonstrates to us that the cure always proceeds the affliction.

We all know that Abraham had two children, Yishmoel (who was born first) and Yitzchok. It was not long after Yitzchok was born that Abraham sent away his eldest son. Both Hagar—mother of Yishmoel and concubine of Abraham—and her son were given ample provisions and then they were sent on their way. Their destination was Egypt. However, Yishmoel became deathly ill en route, and their supply of water was quickly used up. Traveling through the desert, Hagar couldn't find water for her sickly son. Knowing it was just a matter of time, Hagar put her son under a bush and began to cry. There was no doubt in her mind that all hope was lost.

The verse then states:

Then G-d opened her eyes and she perceived a well of water; she went and filled the skin with water and gave the youth to drink. (Genesis 21:19)

G-d sent the much-needed water to Hagar, and her son recovered from his illness. How was this water sent? It is safe to assume that the water appeared miraculously, which is in fact what the verse tells us.

Yet the miracle was not what we might think. Without a close inspection of the verse, we would assume the miracle was simply that an oasis appeared in the middle of the desert. The Steipler Gaon points out that the miracle was much more profound. He points us to

<sup>4</sup> p. 71

the beginning of the verse for our explanation—“Then G-d opened her eyes...” It is clear from these words that the wellspring existed in the desert prior to Hagar’s arrival, *but she could not perceive its presence*. It was only when her son cried for help that the spring appeared.<sup>5</sup> The true miracle here was that Hagar’s water supply ended at this precise location. They did not overshoot the well; rather, their travels ended at the exact place where their salvation would spring forth. This, says the Steipler, is a clear example of the salvation being prepared before the affliction.

He continues by saying that this is not only a Biblical concept. It affects us too. Since we do not live in a perfect world, tragedy and suffering are all too common. There are issues that each one of us grapples with, whether on a daily, weekly, or yearly basis. It’s no wonder that stress, depression, and suicide are terms that are all too familiar. Let us not fall into this pit of despair. The teaching of our ancestors is clear: *Any adversity that we encounter only comes after its resolution is in place*.

If we focus on this truth, then all our difficulties become easier to deal with. We can rejoice with the knowledge that our answer is within reach. The Steipler is not telling us how to deal with the situation, nor is he making light of any difficulties that we face. He is giving us a perspective on viewing our challenges. We can choose to be absorbed in our problems, thinking that hope is a fantasy. But if we realize that our salvation is right before our eyes, waiting to be realized, than we can be truly happy.

How do we realize our salvation? That comes through praying to G-d for help. Just as when Yishmoel was saved from certain death, G-d is anxiously waiting to reveal to us our preexisting salvation.

Let us review our original questions. What did our Sages mean by “increasing our happiness?” How can these temporary pleasures alter our emotional state, allowing our happiness to increase? What’s more, if this is in fact the only happiness to be found in Adar and Purim, how can we celebrate in view of today’s current events?

In light of the Steipler’s words, I think we can answer these questions. Our Sages did not intend for the pleasantries of Purim to give us lasting happiness. The idea above, that for any problem an answer is waiting, can give us this happiness. It is for this reason that we are

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis 21:17 clearly states that it was the voice of Yishmoel that was heard. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that G-d answers the prayers of the sick before those of others.

charged with increasing our happiness now—for it is this month that we read the Megillah and remember this perspective. Happiness not only can be felt despite current events, but is necessary so that we can live with the knowledge that our answers are nearby.

Rabbi Gedaliah Schorr, of blessed memory, took this idea one step deeper.<sup>6</sup> He said that our very salvation may be the challenges that we face. He proves this from the story of Purim. The Talmud points out:

The disciples asked R’ Shimon ben Yochai, “Why did the enemies of Israel (a euphemism for the Jewish people) of that generation deserve extermination?” He said to them, “Because they derived pleasure from the feast of that wicked one (Achashveirosh).” (Megillah 12a)

This passage clearly states that through our involvement in the king’s party our lives were in danger. It was for this reason that Haman was given full authority over the king’s land, which enabled him to decree a Jewish holocaust. Yet, incredibly, this event also allowed for our salvation. Without this party, Queen Vashti would not have been killed, and Esther and Mordechai would have had no contact with the king. From the proverbial ashes comes the salvation.

Understanding this gives us yet another way of coping with and alleviating our desperation. We can rejoice in the fact that our challenges may prove to be our salvation. This perception is real, but to merit its fulfillment we must strive to come close to G-d. When we do, our salvation will reveal itself and remove our challenges from before our eyes.

Let’s take the lessons Purim has to offer us and grow accordingly. Happiness through perspective is within our grasp. We do not need to stay in a mental rut. Through our growth in happiness this Purim, let us pray that G-d brings the Messiah speedily, in our days.

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<sup>6</sup> *Ohr Gedalyahu, Mo’adim*, p. 91

## Appendix

# Mishnah, Midrash, and Talmud

## The Writing of the Oral Torah

The essays in this collection draw on many sources, but an attentive reader will note that a good number of them are described as “Mishnah,” “Midrash,” and “Talmud.” The following paragraphs explain what these terms mean, and outline their roles in Jewish tradition.

In the Sinai desert, the Jewish people received the Torah. It was given to them in two forms: the Written and the Oral.

The Written Torah (*Torah Shebich’sav* in Hebrew) consisted then of the Five Books of Moses. Later, the writings of the Prophets (*Nevi’im*) and the Hagiographa (*Kesuvim*, such as Psalms and the Five Megillos) were added.

The Oral Torah consisted of explanations of Scripture (for instance, that *tefillin*—phylacteries—must be black and square), as well as additional and supplemental laws (such as the obligation to light a menorah on Chanukah).<sup>1</sup>

This second Torah remained a purely oral tradition for many centuries. Eventually, the Sages decided that an outline of this tradition must be composed and written down, to ensure that its transmission would continue undisturbed. The initial phase of this composition ended toward the end of the second century CE, around 100 years after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem.

The central component of that outline is called the **Mishnah**. It contains quotes and legal opinions from sages who lived during and immediately after the era of the Second Temple. The Mishnah is or-

ganized into six series (*sedarim*), each of which contains several volumes (*mesechtos*).

Other teachings of the Sages of this period were compiled in a number of works, the majority of which are called **Midrash**. The Midrash is primarily concerned with explaining and expounding upon Scripture. Some Midrashim cover legal subjects, while others deal with the Biblical narrative, philosophy, and mysticism.

Over the next three or four centuries, two commentaries on the Mishnah were written. Both were called **Talmud**, and both are still studied today. One commentary, the Jerusalem Talmud, was composed by scholars living in Israel. The second, the Babylonian Talmud, became the central body of the now-written Oral Torah. Although many important works have been written in the centuries since (such as *Shulchan Aruch*, the Code of Jewish Law), all of them draw on the principles outlined in the Talmud.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Meshech Chochma*, Leviticus 23:24.