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"Because They Partook of the Feast of the Wicked One"

based on a sicha by

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The story recounted in the Megilla focuses largely on the danger which faced the nation of Israel and the manner in which, owing to God's mercy, they were saved. Someone reading the text of the Megilla may well ask as to the source and nature of this danger - how did it come about? One may, of course, provide a natural and rational explanation for the course of events: the appointment of Haman as the king's second-in-command, his anger at Mordekhai the Jew, and as a result of this combination - his wish to harm Mordekhai personally and, by extension, his decision to harm "Mordekhai's nation" as well.

Chazal's understanding of history in general, and of the events recounted in the Megilla in particular, differs from the above view of events and their apparent context and cause. Anyone wishing to understand the reason for the Heavenly decree cannot simply point to Haman's anger, to Mordekhai's behavior, or to Achashverosh's approval of Haman's plans. The story needs to be viewed against the perspective of Divine providence. The following account is found in the Gemara (Megilla 12a):

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai once asked him, "For what reason were the Jews of that generation (i.e., the generation in which the Purim story took place) deserving of destruction?

He answered, "You tell me the answer." They replied, "Because they participated in the banquet of the evil (Achashverosh)."

He said to them, "If so, then only those in Shushan should have been killed - not Jews all over the world." They said, "Then you tell us."

He replied, "Because they prostrated themselves before an image." They said, "Was this then not an example of favoritism?" (i.e., if they really did prostrate themselves before an image, then why were they deserving of salvation?).

He said, "What they did was only for show (i.e., they acted not out of conviction but rather as a result of pressure, fear and terror), and so God, too, acted only for show."

From Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's answer we learn that his students' original answer, too, was correct. He did not deny that this was a legitimate reason for the decree of destruction; he simply pointed out that such destruction should have been decreed only upon those who took part - the Jews of Shushan - and not upon the Jews who lived in the other provinces of the empire. Therefore he preferred to explain that the sin of prostration before an image had been common to all the Jews of the time, and hence the decree of destruction.

Let us analyze further this deed for which they were deserving of destruction. It would seem that the sin involving the image is fairly clear. Basically, their sin consisted of transferring their relationship with the Holy One, Blessed be He, to some other being. It doesn't really matter whether they actually prostrated themselves before it or whether this relationship found expression in some other way; whether the relationship in question involved an image commonly worshipped (like Haman) or not. So long as the feeling of dependence which is meant to characterize the relationship of every Jew towards God - the total self-sacrifice which is required, the readiness to tread through fire and water - so long as all of this is directed towards something else (a person, an institution, a state, whatever) there is some measure of "prostration before an image" involved. There is some level of betrayal of self-sacrifice, loyalty, the feeling of dependence and the spiritual connection. "Only to God alone!" Prostrating oneself before an image represents a blurring of the definitions of the "kingship of Heaven" vs. "earthly kingship," and the relationship with a mortal king embodied in this situation comes at the expense of the relationship with the King of Kings.

The first reason which the Gemara gives for the decree of destruction, "because they partook of the banquet of the evil (Achashverosh)," is of a different type. Here the nature of the sin is less clear, and I believe that two separate components are involved. Chazal do not directly address the purely halakhic aspect of the issue - after all, there is no law in the Shulchan Arukh forbidding a person from participating in a royal banquet. Chazal even emphasize the fact that from a halakhic point of view those who participated took pains to observe the laws of kashrut: On the phrase, "And the drink was according to the law, no one was forced," the Midrash comments: "No one forced them to drink 'gentile wine.'" In other words, they took the trouble to drink only strictly kosher wine. Another proof of the punctilious observance of religious laws is found later on in the Gemara (Megilla 13b), according to which Haman's claim to Achashverosh that "their (the Jews') laws are different from all other nations" was meant to highlight the extent to which their separation and differentness harmed the kingdom:

"'It is not worth the king's while to bear them' - They ate and drank and despised your kingship, for even if a fly were to fall into the cup of one of them, he would throw they fly out and continue to drink, but if my lord the king would so much as touch the cup of one of them, he would throw it to the floor and would not drink another drop (since that would give it the status of gentile wine)."

Indeed, they were even careful not to drink gentile wine; this is clearly not where the problem lies. I believe that their principal fault is comprised of two elements: one is the actual partaking of the banquet; the other is partaking of a banquet which was not run-of-the-mill, but rather was "the banquet of an evil man."

As the story opens, we find ourselves asking what kind of world serves as its context. In which social and ethical framework do these events take place? If we read the account carefully, the story seems to be unfolding in some surrealistic world where the regular concerns of a normal Jew - problems of family and sustenance, personal and communal challenges - have no place.

In this society no one works, no one has any concern for making a living. What are they busy with all day? One long, continuous series of parties and banquets. Imagine: for an entire half-year, "one hundred and eighty days," they are at one continuous party. This is what characterizes the society; even while sensitive political negotiations are underway and important issues are being discussed, Achashverosh's first concern is for the drinks. The events take place in the metropolis of Shushan, the capital of his kingdom. One could mention several historical analogies, from both the east and the west, all involving a focus on festive celebrations connected to capital cities and royal palaces. Anyone reading an account of this type of lifestyle should stop in amazement and ask himself: from the point of view of the most elementary social justice, what is going on in this country? How many tens of thousands of people have to slave away, day and night, in order to allow this corrupt body of ministers, satraps and governors to maintain this wanton behavior for half a year? Where is the manpower and effort that must have been required in order to produce "the vessels, diverse from one another?" All these drunk and gluttonous ministers of the various provinces are drinking and reveling at the expense of the downtrodden poor, scattered throughout the kingdom. The peasants are bearing the burden of the royal revelling in Shushan, the capital. This is one view of the corruption: injustice which is being perpetrated on the entire population in order that a small, select group can feast and drink from golden vessels. But excessive drinking also has connotations of unruliness which finds expression in a loss of self-control and restraint. "When wine comes in, secrets come out." Such unruliness naturally brings with it - and there is no lack of proof for this, both in literature and in history books - corruption of a different sort. If the drinking itself is orgiastic in nature, then very quickly the situation degenerates and takes on other orgiastic characteristics.

Chazal teach (Megilla 12b):

"'On the seventh day, when the king's heart was merry with wine' - Was his heart then not happy until this (late!) stage? Rabba said: The seventh day was Shabbat, the day upon which Jews eat and drink and then speak words of Torah and words of praise [to the Almighty]. But the pagans eat and drink and then speak lewdness. And so it was at the banquet of [Achashverosh] the evil one. Some said, 'Medean women are [the most] beautiful,' while others claimed 'Persian women are [most] beautiful'. Achashverosh said to them, 'The vessel which I use (a vulgar way of referring to his wife)is neither Mede nor Persian but Chaldean. Would you like to see her?' They said, 'Only if she will [appear before us] naked.'"

Here we see the transition from boisterousness involving wine to sexual unruliness. This is the other aspect of "partaking of his banquet," an aspect which brings us closer to the crux of the problem but still remains far from it.

The claim against Israel for which they were deserving of destruction, "because they partook of the banquet of the evil one," is based on their immersion in this enjoyment. It is founded upon their absorption into a society of continuous pleasure, a society whose existential character and lifestyle - not to mention the practical ramifications which result from it - are completely removed from creative labor, manual work and activity. This settling into the intensive and all-embracing voluptuousness of Achashverosh's banquet is the reason for which Israel was deserving of destruction. What a society; what a world! The extent of the corruption cries out from between the lines describing the "floor of alabaster, marble, pearl and precious stones." Can a society live like this? Is this what political leadership should be? Is this the face of the ruling cadre of a hundred and twenty-seven provinces? Yet another party and more reveling, week after week? Is this the example which should be set?

This is more than societal injustice crying out for correction; more than a loss of internal discipline and ability of self-restraint; deeper than a settling into wine and licentiousness. The very dedication to a life characterized principally by pleasure seeking, and on such a scale, is the reason for the decree of destruction. And it must be emphasized that there is absolutely no connection between the enjoyment of the banquet of the evil Achashverosh and the question of a person's world view or the ascetic dimension in his life. This issue does not depend on a person's attitude towards asceticism and enjoyment: whether one regards a "nazir" as holy or as a sinner, whether fasting is a mitzva or a misguided act, whether one believes that he is destined to answer to God for every pleasure which he denied himself - every fruit which he could have enjoyed but did not - or whether he believes that the way of the nazir, with its ideal of separation, denying oneself the pleasures of the world, is in fact the preferred way of life.

This important debate is genuine and well-founded, and in the words of Chazal - as in the teachings of the great Jewish thinkers - we find a wide variety of views on this topic. But this entire debate, which extends from pleasure at one extreme to self-affliction at the other, is conducted within the assumption of a framework of life which is founded on productivity and creativity; life in which a person sees himself as responsible for giving and not just receiving, for creating and not just for squandering. Life which is based on a consciousness that "man was born to labor" allows for a discussion of how to view the nazirite state, how to relate to self-isolation, and how - if at all - to glorify the eating of ma'aser sheni and kodshim as an instrument and means to Divine service.

This is clearly not the case in Shushan, the "city that doesn't stop" for a hundred and eighty days, at the conclusion of which there is a bonus of an additional week. We are not speaking here of islands of pleasure within the context of creative existence, but rather of an exitence whose essence and foundation is judged by its degree of pleasure. This is an existence wherein work and toil are perceived as a burden, as a package of troubles which has descended upon man. If this task can possibly be laid upon someone else, if the economic burden can be transferred to the peasants of the provinces rather than to Shushan, the capital, then by all means that should be done. After all, who doesn't like to get rid of a burden?

Acclimatizing oneself to such a world, converting this lifestyle into the parody of a value-system, where the goal is no longer contribution to and perfection of the world, creativity and activity, but rather squandering and reveling, drinking and eating - all of this crushes the uniqueness of Israel in particular and the ethical uniqueness of humanity in general. We believe that man is unique in his creative ability. His human responsibility finds expression in construction and preservation. The guiding principle in our path of responsibility is to follow in the way of God. In several places Chazal speak of the mitzva of "You shall walk in His ways" (Devarim 28:9) as expressing man's obligation to imitate God, as it were. Among the examples brought in this connection is the following: "Just as He is merciful, so shall you be merciful; just as He is compassionate, so shall you be compassionate." On the other hand, the Sifri and the Gemara (Sota 14) make mention not only of traits of character but also of actions and deeds: "Just as He buries the dead, so shall you bury the dead; just as He visits the sick, so shall you visit the sick...."

The Midrash on Parashat Kedoshim carries this idea one step further. The pasuk, "When you come to the land and you shall plant all types of fruit-bearing trees..." (Vayikra 19:23) could be interpreted simply as a description: What will you do when you come to the land and find no fruit trees, for the first three years? The Midrash, however, sees in this pasuk a Divine command. "When you come to the Land of Israel, do not be satisfied simply with eating of its fruit and being satiated with its goodness. 'You shall plant all types of fruit trees!'" The Midrash sees this command as falling under the category of "And you shall walk in His ways": "Just as God planted trees, as it is written, 'And God planted a garden in Eden from the east', so shall you plant trees, as it is written, 'and you shall plant all types of fruit-bearing trees.'"

Such activity obviously has nothing in common with the perception of labor as a curse. This "work," this giving, this planting, is creativity which brings with it a blessing. This is how God created the world, and this is the task with which He entrusts us. Before any creature was created, the world was chaos and emptiness. Creation itself chased the chaos away, and in its place "the spirit of God hovered" - the spirit which builds, creates and heals all of existence. God has placed before us a world in which our destiny is "lashevet" (see Yishayahu 45:18) - Chazal explain that this refers not to sitting (yeshiva) but rather to constructive settling of the world (yishuv). We do not mean that a person should find himself a chair to sit on and relax, but rather that he should settle the world constructively and creatively.

Such is the nature of creation, and that is the task that God has laid upon us. Perhaps there is a dimension of labor and toil which can be considered a "burden," a punishment meted out to mankind - "By the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread," "thorns and thistles shall [the ground] produce for you." But all this refers to the manner of labor and the degree of dwhich it entails. The actual necessity of work has no connection whatsoever to this curse, and is not perceived in Jewish philosophy as a burden. Before any mention of Adam's sin, the Torah already describes God as having placed man in the garden of Eden in order "to work it and to guard it" (Bereishit 2:15).

The opposite is true of the philosophy of hedonism - the distancing of oneself as far as possible from labor and toil. The view of life as a sort of "one-hundred-and-eighty-day idyll" represents a most serious moral deviation from our world view, our lifestyle and our philosophy. Let us emphasize once again that the problem was not halakhic in nature. A person may drink wine which is "kosher la-mehadrin" and eat meat which is "glatt kosher" and still, despite all this, wallow in "partaking of the banquet of the evil one." The evil master of the banquet also knows how to buy meat at a kosher butcher. That is not the point. A person who holds the view that every excess and every pleasure is permitted - so long as it doesn't run counter to the laws of kosher foods or the laws of mixing meat and milk - is making a fatal mistake. While taking pains over the tiniest details of the laws of kashrut, one may still completely miss the point of Divine service.

The above words do not address the purpose of labor. Obviously, if a person is capable of being creative, fruitful and constructive in the spiritual realm, that certainly represents a lofty ideal. The Rambam (at the end of his Laws of Kings) describes the messianic epoch as a situation in which "all valuables are as common as dust," a situation in which there are no more political or military considerations, and "The world will be occupied with nothing but knowledge of God, and therefore the Jews will be [considered] very wise, aware of hidden knowledge, and they will achieve knowledge of their Creator to the extent of human capacity, as it is written, 'For the earth will be full of knowledge of God, like the waters cover the sea.'"

Here we find a transition from one type of labor to another. But the very dedication to creativity and activity, to building, to effort and to labor represents the common denominator. This is the basic perception in the universal sphere, and all the more so in the Jewish sphere. In the Midrash on Parashat Lekh-Lekha, Chazal ask what made the land of Israel attractive to Avraham: Not its metaphysical holiness, not its mystical nature, but rather the experience of climbing up on a rock and viewing the huge contrast between the societal climate he had been used to in Ur Kasdim (later to become the kingdom of Achashverosh) and that of Eretz Yisrael. In Ur Kasdim he used to see people eating, drinking and acting in a frivolous fashion, while in Eretz Yisrael he observed them "ploughing at the [proper] time for ploughing, sowing at the time for sowing, weeding at the time of weeding, hoeing at the time of hoeing." Of course, when the time came, he also watched them "harvesting at the time of harvest and eating at the time for eating." This, Avraham realized, was a creative, constructive society which invested great efforts, a society with an ethic of giving and not just taking, doing and not just squandering. Upon seeing this, he thought of those who excelled in their frivolous decadence and said, "Let my portion not be with them," while concerning the land of weeding and hoeing, of sowing and ploughing, he said, "Let my portion be in this land." Indeed, there is a certain universal dimension here, a dimension of planting and toil, which applies both in the context of God's world in general and within the "four amot" of Halakha. This dimension exerted the force of its attraction on Avraham and characterized his world, and this is the dimension which reflects the philosophy and existence of the nation of Israel.

The abandonment of this framework, the spiritual and existential decline from a world of weeding and hoeing, sowing and ploughing, to a world of eating and reveling, a world of "one hundred and eighty days" of partying and then another seven days of drinking wine - this eating and drinking (despite the "kosher le-mdehadrin" label on all the bottles) was the reason for the decree of destruction.

Another factor was involved here as well: not just prolonged eating and gluttony, but gluttony in the context of the banquet of such an evil person. This identification with the environment reflects an assimilation into the surrounding society; a moral neutrality regarding Achashverosh's world. However, even without this additional aspect - even if they had partaken in a similar banquet hosted by someone who was not evil - they still would have been deserving of destruction.

Chazal's message here is a sobering one, and it makes very stringent demands on the Jewish nation. Chazal's words are pertinent and applicable to every generation, including our own, in our times and in our place. One of the oustanding characteristics of those who started the modern-day "return to Zion," and of the State of Israel in its early days, was the serious commitment to toil and the concomitant shying away from luxury and excess. There were those who couched this phenomenon in ideological terms, like A.D. Gordon and others. But even those who had never heard of Gordon still lived in this reality and formed part of a society whose moral tone - and in particular the value of labor, contributing and creating - was its basic staple. Both ideologically and practically, these were the prized possessions of the various waves of aliya, and it is thanks to them that a state with a moral character, with ideals, emerged. Even if the ideological system as a whole is not one with which we agree, these components - dedication, toil and effort, sweat and labor (even if at the time they were drawn from foreign sources) - reflected in some measure the insight of Avraham Avinu, who saw the difference between an empty and wanton society, and one which invested effort, built and created.

To our great sorrow, a significant and serious decline has taken place in this area in recent years. The decline from a philosophy and lifestyle of creativity to a world of pleasure-seeking, of "partaking of the banquet," is a regrettable process, for which we can only hope for God's forgiveness. This is a process which is overtaking us and which is beginning to characterize our society. And lest my words be misunderstood: I have no nostalgic wish for the Jewish nation to live in the fashion that the pioneers who drained the swamps did. I am not suggesting, based on some retrospective romantic notion, that that same level of material modesty which characterized the early years of the state should be maintained forever. I accept completely that as the cake grows, as economic growth increases, as more creative and productive work become available, the standard of living should rise proportionately, such that our lives are made easier and more pleasant in real, human terms, to the extent that this may be effectuated in a just way.

But this is beside the point. The question isn't whether we should be living today in huts and corrugated iron shacks just because that's the way they lived sixty years ago. The question concerns our outlook and our aspirations. Do we see labor as a burden, such that our ideal is to minimize it and thereby to reach a maximal level of pleasure (reminiscent of the ideal which characterizes to such a great extent the culture which exists overseas in the western world, to which we are exposed and which influences us)? According to this view, work is boring and one should try to escape it. If this escape were in the direction of a Beit Midrash or a synagogue, it wouldn't be so bad. But the escape is more often in the direction of clubs and pubs. People try to "forget" the world, and thereby to escape from constructive, creative work to a world of pleasure, desire and revelling. And we know only too well that this pleasure becomes an aspiration; the ideal is to keep work to a minimum and to raise the pleasure level to the maximum. This represents problem with one's value system. But in addition there is also a moral problem - from the point of view of social justice, which could not tolerate such a philosophy even if Israel ever reached a level of "luxury," of a great abundance of everything, such that the state would no longer rely on the generosity of the Jews of other countries.

I heard yesterday that there is talk of investing seventy million dollars in the construction of a hotel in Tiberias which will charge its visitors five hundred dollars per night. The entrepreneur announced that most of the clientele will come from overseas, but he believes that a number of Israelis will also be drawn to this "attraction." Do we need this? How will the residents of Tiberias allow this abomination to stare them in the face? Apart from the aspect of social justice, the very wallowing in such an ideal contradicts the foundations of our beliefs and our essence.

For those involved in Torah study in particular, the value of creativity and labor take on additional significance. Chazal said, "'If you will walk in my statutes' - i.e., if you labor in Torah." This holds a double benefit: the value of labor in general, and an additional value in the fact that his labor is in the sphere of Torah. We are commanded not just to engage in "yishuv ha-olam" (settling the world) in the physical sense, but in the spiritual sense as well.

As Bnei Torah, we have a special obligation to involve ourselves in the world of creativity and activity. We have to ensure, to the greatest degree possible, that this creativity takes place within the world of Torah - spiritual creativity; creativity which contains some contribution towards the realization of the vision of the messianic era. Rambam's vision of redemption is far from being realized - perhaps because its preconditions have not yet been fulfilled: valuables are not yet available like dust, and we still feel external pressures from various sources. But the hope of realizing that vision to the extent that we are able is certainly part of our task and our responsibility in the present. This vision is what should be standing at the center of our consciousness, as part of our contribution to bringing closer the day upon which that wonderful prophecy will be realized: "And the earth shall be filled with knowledge of God, like the waters cover the sea."

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