Purim: Holiday of Covenant and Salvation

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PURIM KATAN

In order to fathom the nature of the holiday of Purim, I would like to examine the distinction between it and Purim Katan. In the last chapter of Orach Chayim, the Shulchan Arukh cites two views as to whether or not one may observe a ta'anit (optional fast) or conduct a hesped (eulogy) on Purim Katan (the 14th and 15th days of Adar Rishon, one month before Purim itself, the 14th and 15th of Adar Sheni). After bringing this debate, the Shulchan Arukh rules that the solemn prayers of Tachanun and La-menatze'ach are omitted. The Rema adds that common practice has adopted the first view cited by the Mechaber, forbidding hesped and ta'anit. He continues by citing a third view, requiring celebration on Purim Katan, but observes that this has not been the commonly accepted practice.

We thus find three positions concerning festivity on Purim Katan:

1. No such requirement exists at all.

2. There is a mitzva to conduct festive celebration on Purim Katan.

3. Though we have no obligation to engage in festivities, ta'anit and hesped are forbidden.

The source for this discussion appears in Masekhet Megilla (6b). The mishna rules,

"If the Megilla was read on the fourteenth and a leap year was declared [a leap year can be declared even during Adar itself], it is read again in Adar Sheni."

The Gemara cites a debate regarding the proper procedure if we know before Purim that a second Adar has been added. One view holds that Purim is observed in such a case in Adar Rishon, whereas the other position, which has been accepted as halakha, rules that we observe Purim on Adar Sheni. Rabbi Yochanan, cited by the Gemara, explains that these two positions evolve from different readings of a verse in the Megilla, that Purim is observed "be-khol shana ve-shana" – each and every year. Rabbi Yochanan understands this clause as implying a consistent pattern to be followed every year. According to one opinion, just as is most years Purim is observed in the month immediately following Shevat, on a leap year, too, this pattern must be maintained, and thus Purim is celebrated on Adar Rishon. The second view, however, feels that we must follow a different pattern – by which Purim always falls during the month preceding Nissan. Therefore, in a leap year, we should celebrate Purim on Adar Sheni. As mentioned, halakha has accepted this view.

WHY OBSERVE PURIM IN ADAR SHENI?

The question arises, however, as to why, if we indeed consider Adar Sheni the "real" Adar, we afford any significance whatsoever to Adar Rishon. Why would Halakha forbid eulogies and fasting on Purim Katan? The position cited in the Shulchan Arukh permitting ta'anit and hesped appears more logical. If Adar Rishon is not really Adar, and so the 14th and 15th days are not Purim, why should we refrain from fasting or conducting eulogies – not to mention celebrating?

We must address a second problem, as well, regarding the Gemara itself. If we would ask ourselves which of the two views seems more logical, we would undoubtedly side with the position of Rabbi Eliezer ben Rabbi Yossi, that Adar Rishon is Adar and Adar Sheni is the additional, thirteenth month. If the High Court decides to add a month to the calendar, presumably the thirteenth month is to be seen as the extra month. After Shevat comes Adar, and after Adar, before we begin the new year with the month of Nissan, we have an extra, thirteenth month. And yet, Halakha follows the position of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who considers Adar Rishon, the twelfth month, as the add-on. Wherein lies the rationale in this position?

What's more, the Megilla itself appears to require the observance of Purim on Adar Rishon. Throughout Megillat Esther, the month on which Haman planned to destroy the Jews is referred to as "the twelfth month, the month of Adar." Clearly, then, we should commemorate this event on the twelfth month, Adar Rishon, rather than on the thirteenth month, Adar Sheni!

A third question further compounds the problem. The Yerushalmi (on this mishna) notes that the year of the Purim story was in fact a leap year. If so, then the observance of Purim on Adar Sheni becomes altogether unintelligible. According to all views, if someone passes away during Adar Rishon, then in subsequent leap years his yahrzeit is observed during Adar Rishon, and conversely, if he passes away during Adar Sheni, his yahrzeit will occur on Adar Sheni. The same applies regarding birthdays, bar mitzvas, etc. The question arises only when the individual died during Adar of a normal year: during which month does a relative observe the yahrzeit? (As we will soon see, this question is subject to a dispute between the Mechaber and the Rema.) Clearly, if the miracle actually occurred in Adar Rishon, we have no reason to observe Purim during Adar Sheni! [1]

Yet another difficulty arises from the ruling of the Rema. As we briefly noted, the Mechaber and Rema debate the issue of when to observe in a leap year the yahrzeit of a relative who passed away during a regular year. Knowing that in a leap year we observe Purim in Adar Sheni, we would expect that the yahrzeit would similarly be commemorated on the second Adar. This is, in fact, the position of the Mechaber (O.C. 568:7). Following the model of Purim, the Mechaber rules that we consider Adar Sheni the true Adar, and the yahrzeit thus falls during that month. The Rema, however, notes the common practice to observe the yahrzeit during Adar Rishon.[2] The Rema's position requires explanation. If Adar Rishon constitutes the true Adar, why do we celebrate Purim on Adar Sheni? Why wouldn't we observe Purim during the "real" Adar, when we would observe a yahrzeit?

TWO ASPECTS OF PESACH

By way of introducing our explanation, let us briefly digress into a discussion of the festival of Pesach.

Pesach, like virtually all festivals, has a dual theme. First, God took us from Egypt, an event commemorated through the observance of Pesach. But, additionally, there is a theme that we may perhaps refer to as "standing before God," the establishment of a covenant between the Almighty and the Nation of Israel. The first theme marks the redemption from suffering, oppression and bondage. The second theme relates to the fourth of the "four expressions of redemption" – "I will take you for Me as a nation, and I will be for you a God." Theoretically, God could have saved Benei Yisrael without the establishment of a covenant; conversely, such a covenant could have been established without a period of suffering followed by salvation. But God did both for Benei Yisrael, and these two elements are jointly commemorated through the observance of the festival of Pesach.

We find this duality of Pesach manifest in the halakhot relevant to this festival. The mitzva of korban pesach consists of two obligations: the offering of the sacrifice, and the consumption of its meat. The first is to be performed on the fourteenth of Nissan, before the miracles of the plague of the firstborn and the exodus occurred. It commemorates not the exodus, but rather the berit, the covenant. The meat's consumption, by contrast, must take place specifically on the night of the fifteenth, when the miracle occurred and Benei Yisrael were freed from bondage.

Compelling evidence of the "covenant" aspect of the korban pesach may be drawn from the institution of Pesach Sheni, the offering brought a full month after Pesach by those who could not bring it on Pesach itself. Clearly, such an offering, brought several weeks after the fourteenth of Nissan, cannot possibly commemorate the miracle of exodus. It rather relates to the covenant, which remains valid even after Nissan.

This quality of Pesach Sheni finds its expression in a sugya (Pesachim 93b) discussing the verse (Bamidbar 9:13) that describes one who neglects to offer the korban pesach. "But if a man… refrains from performing the pesach" – this, the Gemara claims, refers to Pesach Rishon, in Nissan, whereas the later clause – "… for he did not present the Lord's offering" – speaks of Pesach Sheni. The title "pesach" can apply only to the korban pesach of Nissan, which commemorates God's having "passed over" the homes of Benei Yisrael. To the sacrifice of Pesach Sheni, by contrast, we can refer only as "korban Hashem" – the Lord's sacrifice.

Perhaps the strongest expression of this "berit" component emerges from an idea of the Meshekh Chokhma. As we know, a convert must undergo three rituals to complete the conversion process: circumcision, immersion and the offering of a sacrifice. According to the Meshekh Chokhma, if one converts on the day before Pesach, the korban pesach he brings that afternoon qualifies as his conversion offering. If the paschal offering serves merely to commemorate the miracle of the Exodus, then it could not have any impact on the conversion process. Once, however, this korban involves the establishment of the covenant between God and Benei Yisrael, it stands to reason that just as Am Yisrael entered into a berit through this sacrifice, so can an individual join this covenant through the korban pesach. The consumption of the sacrificial meat, however, which must occur at nighttime, when the miracle took place, commemorates the exodus.

THE PROBLEM OF DELAYED OBSERVANCE

With this in mind, let us now return to Purim and add a few more questions to those we have already posed. The Gemara notes that Rabban Shimon's view, that we observe Purim on Adar Sheni, appears to violate the principle of "ein ma'avirin al ha-mitzvot" – we may not delay an opportunity to perform a mitzva. How, the Gemara asks, can Rabban Shimon allow delaying the observance of Purim until Adar Sheni? The Gemara replies that in Rabban Shimon's view, it is preferable to juxtapose the two "ge'ulot" – festivals of redemption, Purim and Pesach. The value of observing Purim and Pesach in close proximity to one another overrides the general concern to avoid delaying mitzva performance. Why should this be case? Why would the juxtaposition between Purim and Pesach override the prohibition against delaying mitzvot?[3]

We encounter another problematic halakha with regard to the situation of "Purim meshulash," when Purim falls on Shabbat.[4] The Gemara (Megilla 4b) teaches that Chazal forbade the reading of the Megilla on Shabbat, just as they prohibited taking lulav or blowing shofar on Shabbat. Therefore, when Purim falls on Shabbat, the Megilla is read beforehand. The Gemara does not mention when the se'udat Purim (Purim meal) should be conducted. Regarding other instances when the Megilla reading occurs earlier than Purim day (namely, the villagers, whom Chazal allowed to read the Megilla earlier than the fourteenth), the Gemara (5a) rules that they celebrate on Purim itself, even though they read the Megilla on an earlier day. The question arises as to whether this applies to the case of Shabbat, as well.

Do the villagers conduct the se'uda on the fourteenth because they simply have no reason to do otherwise, or because the se'uda must take place specifically on the fourteenth? According to the former option, when Purim falls on Shabbat we might prefer that the se'uda be conducted earlier. If, however, Halakha requires that the se'uda take place specifically on Purim day, then we would not allow an early celebration before Purim.

The accepted practice today (in Jerusalem) when the fifteenth falls on Shabbat is to conduct the se'uda on Sunday, following the ruling of the Yerushalmi. At first glance, this halakha seems to violate the provision mentioned in the Gemara, of "ve-lo ya'avor" – the observance of Purim cannot take place any later than Purim itself. Though Chazal permitted certain communities to read the Megilla before the fourteenth, we never permit them to do so after Purim. Why, then, do Jerusalemites conduct their festive Purim celebrations on Sunday, the sixteenth of Adar?[5]

The Ran suggests a distinction between zekhira – the verbal commemoration of the miracle, the reading of the Megilla – and asiya – the festival celebration. When the Gemara ruled out the possibility of delaying Purim observance past the day itself, it did so only with respect to zekhira – the reading of the Megilla. The asiya, however, may, in fact, be delayed.

Why should this be the case? What underlies this distinction between zekhira and asiya?

TWO REDEMPTIONS OF PURIM

The answer lies in perhaps the most basic question of all: Why do we celebrate Purim in the first place? The Rambam writes in the beginning of Hilkhot Chanuka that in these two stories, Chanuka and Purim, Am Yisrael faced grave danger and the Almighty saved them. One could argue that what the two situations have in common is nothing more than terrible oppression, from which Benei Yisrael were subsequently freed. But if so, we must ask the obvious question: Are these the only two periods in history in which Benei Yisrael suffered cruelty and persecution and were then redeemed? Do we always establish a festival when a miracle occurs? We find many different miracles documented in Tanakh and Chazal – the flowering of Aharon's staff, the manna, the miracles in the Temple as recorded in Pirkei Avot, etc. Even Pesach commemorates only the Exodus itself; we have no special festival to celebrate the splitting of the sea. Nor do we conduct formal celebrations for the splitting of the Jordan River, the miracle in Bet Choron during Yehoshua's time, or others.

We know that in the times of Chazal a book was composed entitled "Megillat Ta'anit," which describes various miracles that occurred and records the dates established as quasi-festivals in commemoration, days on which ta'anit and hesped are forbidden and Tachanun is omitted. The Gemara (Rosh Ha-shana 18b) tells us that all these holidays became null and void after the Temple's destruction, with the exception of Chanuka and Purim. Why are these two festivals singled out in this regard?[6]

I would suggest the following explanation. Chanuka and Purim differ from the other festivals because they are days of berit. During these two periods in history, the covenant of Sinai faced an uncertain future. In the time of the First Temple, the covenant stood. Whether the nation observed more or observed less, the framework of the berit formed the basic framework of their lives. "You alone have I singled out of all the families on earth – that is why I will call you to account for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Benei Yisrael sinned and received punishment within the framework of their unique relationship with the Almighty. But in the Torah we find as well a description of a different situation, of complete abandonment of the berit: "… they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them… I will abandon them and hide My countenance from them" (Devarim 31:17). This signifies not a punishment within the preexisting framework of the berit, but rather complete detachment.

In the generation of the destruction and its aftermath, the question of the covenant's continued validity arose. There were those who saw the churban as God's revocation of the covenant. Benei Yisrael came to Yechezkel and asked, "Does a slave bear any further responsibility towards his master after having been sold?" (Sanhedrin 105a). They viewed the churban as a divorce, the end of their relationship with the Almighty. The exile marked the end of the unique bond of the berit.

These questions arose not only because of Benei Yisrael's banishment from the land, but from their presence in exile, as well. Some claimed that the Torah bore relevance only in the Land of Israel, when they lived among idolaters. Then the Torah was more moral and more sophisticated than the surrounding culture. But in the culture into which they now integrated, they argued, the Torah no longer served any purpose. Shushan had a very liberal society – "to comply with every man's wishes" (Esther 1:8). According to Chazal, Achashverosh even made kosher food available at his royal feast. Many Jews that the Torah served no need in Persia. They were free to assimilate and fully integrate into the surrounding society. Additionally, some may have adopted the pagan-style belief that God has dominion over Canaan, but His power did not extent to Persia. These arguments cast a dark shadow over the berit between Am Yisrael and God, and the midrashim identify many allusions to this effect from the beginning of the Megilla. A similar situation developed in the period of the Chanuka story, as well.

On Purim we celebrate not only the annulment of Haman's decree, but also the renewal of the covenant, as Chazal interpret: "'Kiyemu ve-kibelu' (Esther 9:27) – they affirmed what they had already received" (Shabbat 88a). For this reason, Esther emerges as the heroine of the story, rather than Mordekhai. Mordekhai was a Jerusalemite. He encountered no dilemma; for him, the covenant was never in question. Esther, however, had no father or mother. She experienced the internal struggle and confrontation of Diaspora Jewry. Megillat Esther is the story of this dilemma, whether to identify with Am Yisrael, or to accept the vanities of the local population. "They re-accepted [the Torah] during the times of Achashverosh" (ibid.). They reaffirmed the Torah's relevance to all times, to all places, under all conditions. The renewal of the covenant commemorated on Purim came on the heels of the exile, of this encounter – specifically, from the questioning of the covenant that resulted from this encounter.

REMEMBRANCE AND CELEBRATION

Returning, then, to the Ran's comments, he saw in zekhira and asiya these two components of Purim: the salvation and the covenant. The term "zekhira," remembrance, which the Gemara interprets as a reference to the Megilla reading, is often associated with the covenant: "Zekhor lanu berit avot;" "Ve-zakharti et beriti;" "zokher ha-berit." The concept of "berit" means attachment, identification, an inability to separate. One party makes promises to the other, because they are attached to one another. Chazal describe marriage with the term, "berit nisu'in," the covenant of marriage. The bride and groom make all sorts of commitments to one another, because they cannot even imagine separating.

"Asiya," by contrast, relates to joy and celebration: "to make them ['la'asot otam'] days of festivity and joy" (9:19). Whereas "zekhira" refers to remembering the covenant, "asiya" means the celebration of our physical triumph. Therefore, the Ran claims, the zekhira cannot take place after Purim. Without a renewed covenant, we do not have Purim, just as the paschal offering must be brought on the fourteenth, before the event itself, in order to create this covenant.

The opposite is true concerning asiya. One cannot commemorate salvation before it takes place. Rav Chayim Brisker read this idea into the verse (Tehillim 13:6), "But I trust in Your faithfulness, my heart will exult in Your deliverance; I will sing to the Lord for He has been good to me." Even though I trust in Your faithfulness, I know with confidence that the salvation will arrive, and I already rejoice in Your deliverance, and "I will sing to the Lord for He has been good to me" – only once the "goodness" actually unfolds can one "sing to the Lord." The same applies to bereavement. Mourning does not begin when the patient takes deathly ill, but rather once he has actually passed on. Commemoration of any event must occur after that event, not before. When it comes to Purim, then, the berit cannot take place too late, and the celebration cannot occur too early. Though Chazal allowed the villagers to read the Megilla earlier than the fourteenth of Adar, they cannot celebrate before the fourteenth. When Purim falls on Shabbat and the Megilla cannot be read on Purim day itself, the zekhira – the berit – takes place earlier, whereas the asiya – the celebration – occurs later.

The same principle applies to a leap year. Adar Rishon marks the real date of Purim; the miracle occurred in this month. If we accept the Rema's position, we must conclude that the commemoration of the Purim miracle must be held on Adar Rishon. Therefore, one must celebrate on the fourteenth of Adar Rishon. The berit, by contrast, may be delayed. Similar to the institution of Pesach Sheni, the covenant remains intact and valid even a month later, in Adar Sheni. We thus commemorate the berit on Adar Sheni (by reading the Megilla), in order to juxtapose this redemption with the redemption of Nissan.

Which berit did Benei Yisrael renew in the time of Achashverosh? The berit of Pesach. Juxtaposing Purim and Pesach is more than just a nice idea. It goes to the heart of the Purim story, to the renewed covenant. We draw an association between these two festivals because of this shared theme: renewing the covenant.

THE DISTINCT THEMES OF PURIM AND PURIM KATAN

It thus emerges that in Adar Rishon we celebrate the miracle, the salvation. Purim Katan belongs to the group of days marked in Megillat Ta'anit; we refrain from fasting and eulogies, but no festivities are required. This is the ruling of the Mechaber and the common practice to which the Rema testifies. We do not observe a festival; we do not observe a period of "standing before God" as we do on other festivals. When Adar Sheni comes, when we renew the covenant, then we have a Yom Tov.

The view cited by the Rema, however, disagrees, and requires festive celebration even on Purim Katan. According to this position, the status of Purim Katan exceeds that of the days mentioned in Megillat Ta'anit. The asiya itself requires festivity; the celebration of the miracle, even independent of the renewal of the covenant, demands "festivity and joy."

Let us conclude with the Yerushalmi mentioned earlier, which informs us that the Purim story occurred during a leap year. How, then, can we even consider celebrating Purim in Adar Sheni? If it all depended on the specific date, indeed, this would be untenable. But in truth, as we have seen, the date of Purim falls on Adar Rishon. The berit, however, can be delayed – even if the original event occurred in Adar Rishon. The association between the berit and Pesach warrants this delay of the Purim observance until Adar Sheni. Whereas on Purim Katan we celebrate the miracle itself, on Purim Gadol we celebrate the renewal of the covenant.

It seems to me that herein lies the meaning of Shushan Purim, as well. We omit Tachanun for two days, on Purim itself and on Shushan Purim. The reestablishment of the covenant occurred on only one day, but the miracle was spread over two days: the Jews fought on the thirteenth and fourteenth. The salvation is thus observed for two days, whereas the commemoration of the berit is celebrated for only a single day.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] The Chatam Sofer (O.C. 183) addresses this question and suggests a novel but far-fetched explanation. Towards the end of the first chapter of Megilla, the Gemara tells that when the lots drew by Haman fell on the month of Adar, he rejoiced, knowing that the anniversary of Moshe Rabbenu's death falls during this month. He did not know that Moshe had been born during Adar, as well. The Chatam Sofer suggests that the year was scheduled to have a second Adar added, during which Moshe's yahrzeit would be observed (at least according to the Mechaber). Haman thus rejoiced that he could execute his plan of destroying the Jews before the yahrzeit of Moshe, whose merit would have protected them. Chazal therefore cancelled the extra Adar for that year, such that Moshe's yahrzeit could help protect the Jewish people from Haman's harsh edict. This explanation is built upon many questionable assumptions, and demonstrates just how difficult a problem we are dealing with.

[2] The Rema adds that some have adopted the stringency of observing the yahrzeit twice, during both Adars. The Vilna Gaon considers this practice mandatory, and not just a stringency (it is "mei-ikar ha-din").

[3] The Vilna Gaon claims that, in truth, both months have the status of Adar, and we must therefore weigh the various considerations to determine when the observance of Purim should occur. But this, too, is problematic.

[4] In our calendar, this can happen only in Jerusalem, where Purim is celebrated on the fifteenth of Adar; the fourteenth never falls on Shabbat. In the times of Chazal, however, even the fourteenth could fall on Shabbat.

[5] Indeed, the Ra'a, cited by the Ran (on the Rif to 3a), claims that we do not accept the Yerushalmi's separation between the reading and the se'uda. Similarly, R. Levi ibn Chaviv, who served as the rabbi of Jerusalem in the sixteenth century, did not follow the Yerushalmi's ruling, and instead conducted his Purim se'uda on Shabbat. But how do we explain the accepted practice, to move the se'uda to Sunday?

[6] Though one might argue that quantitatively, these festivals commemorate a greater salvation, the removal of a greater threat, it is unclear to what extent this assumption is correct.