**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT TETZAVEH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The final verses of Parashat Tetzaveh speak about the *mizbach ha-ketoret* – the incense altar in the *Mishkan*, upon which incense was offered twice each day. The Torah strictly prohibits offering any sacrifice on this altar, which is to be used exclusively for incense: “Do not offer on it a foreign incense, a burnt-offering or a grain offering, and do not pour a libation upon it” (30:9). This prohibition is listed by the Rambam as one of the 613 Biblical commands (*Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *lo ta’aseh* 82).

*Minchat Chinukh* (104) raises the question of why the Rambam, and others who listed the Biblical commands, did not list two separate prohibitions – offering a sacrifice, and pouring a libation. After all, the Torah make two independent statements: “*lo ta’alu alav ketoret zara ola u-mincha*” – forbidding offering a different form of incense or sacrifices – and “*ve-neisekh lo tisekhu alav*” – forbidding pouring libations. Seemingly, although these two prohibitions are, obviously, related, nevertheless, these are two separate actions which the Torah forbids in two separate pronouncements. And yet, the Rambam incorporated both under a single Biblical prohibition. This question was raised also by Rav Yerucham Perlow, in his work on Rav Saadia Gaon’s listing of the *mitzvot* (*lo ta’aseh* 184-5).

Rav Yisrael David Schlesinger (cited in [*Magishei Mincha*, Parashat Tetzaveh, 5779](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/131_20_79.pdf)) answered that, apparently, the Rambam and others maintained that the Torah here presents but one command – to preserve the incense altar’s exclusive role. The root of this prohibition, in the view of the Rambam, is the nature of the *mizbach ha-ketoret*, which is made for the sole purpose of incense, and not for any other ritual. As such, there is but one prohibition – the prohibition against using this altar for a purpose other than incense. Indeed, the Torah concludes its discussion of the *mizbach ha-ketoret* with the pronouncement, “*Kodesh kodashim hu le-Hashem*” (“It is the holiest of the holies for the Lord” – 30:10), which Rashi explains to mean, “The altar is consecrated for only these matters, and not for any other service.” This phrase could be understood as defining the prohibition introduced in the previous verse, which forbids offering sacrifices or pouring libations on this altar. The essence of this law is that the *mizbach ha-ketoret* is earmarked for the specific purpose of offering incense, and therefore performing any other ritual on the altar violates this prohibition. (This is also indicated by the Rambam’s formulation in *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash* (2:11): “*ein makrivin alav davar acheir*” – “nothing else is offered on it.”) Hence, there is but one prohibition, and not two separate commands.

*Minchat Chinukh*, apparently, understood differently. He appears to have presumed that the Torah here forbids two specific actions, rather than designating the altar for an exclusive purpose which results in a generic prohibition against using it for other purposes.

Another possible expression of this conceptual question is *Minchat Chinukh*’s discussion later regarding the status of an offering brought at the site of the *mizbach ha-ketoret*, when this altar is not present. The Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (59a) establishes that if, for whatever reason, the *mizbach ha-ketoret* is moved, the incense is offered at the site where the altar normally stands, even though there is currently no altar. *Minchat Chinukh* writes that if the incense may be offered at that site, then it stands to reason that bringing a different offering at that site transgresses the prohibition against bringing an offering instead of the incense on the incense altar. Perhaps consistent with his questioning why the Rambam listed just one prohibition, *Minchat Chinukh* did not consider the possibility that this prohibition is integrally linked to the altar itself. Meaning, the prohibition is defined as misusing the *mizbach ha-ketoret*, and thus, by definition, this prohibition does not apply in the altar’s absence. Refusing to accept this premise, *Minchat Chinukh* asserted that one violates this prohibition by offering a sacrifice or pouring incense at the site of the *mizbach ha-ketoret*, even if it is not present.

*Minchat Chinukh* similarly raises the question as to whether one violates this prohibition by sprinkling sacrificial blood on the *mizbach ha-ketoret*. (Sacrificial blood is to be sprinkled only on the other altar, which stood in the courtyard outside the *Mikdash*, the only exception being on Yom Kippur, when the blood of the special atonement sacrifices was sprinkled on the *mizbach ha-ketoret*, as the Torah briefly mentions here in Parashat Tetzaveh – 30:10.) The Torah mentions only the offering of a sacrifice, and the pouring of libations, prompting *Minchat Chinukh* to question the *Sefer Ha-chinukh*’s comment that one violates this prohibition even by sprinkling sacrificial blood on the *mizbach ha-ketoret* – something which is not mentioned here by the Torah. Once again, *Minchat Chinukh* did not consider the possibility that the Torah here simply establishes the incense offering as the exclusive function of this altar, thus resulting in a generic prohibition against using it for any other ritual purpose. This appears to have been the perspective of the *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, and so he applied this prohibition even to rituals which were not specified by the Torah, as the Torah here issues a single, generic command forbidding using the incense altar for a different purpose than the one for which it is made.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Tetzaveh describes the special garments worn by the *kohen gadol*, including the *tzitz* – a thin strip made from pure gold which the *kohen gadol* wore on his forehead, and which bore the inscription, “*Kodesh le-Hashem*” (“sacred to the Lord” – 28:36-38). By wearing the *tzitz*, God instructed, the *kohen gadol* would “bear the iniquity of the sacred offerings which the Israelites would consecrate” (28:38). The Gemara (Yoma 7a and elsewhere) explains this to mean that when the *kohen gadol* wears the *tzitz*, sacrifices which were inadvertently offered in a state of *tum’a* (impurity) were rendered valid. The phrase “*avon ha-kodashim*” (“iniquity of the sacred offerings”) refers to the “iniquity” of accidentally offering a sacrifice that had become *tamei* and thus invalid, and it instructs that through the *tzitz* on the *kohen gadol*’s forehead, such a sacrifice, after the fact, is considered valid, such that a new one need not be brought.

Another function of the *tzitz* is mentioned by the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 10:6), which comments that the *tzitz* atones for sins that are somehow related to the forehead. According to one view, this means that the *tzitz* atones for the quality of brazenness – the lack of shame – which is described as a characteristic which expresses itself on the forehead. (The Midrash notes the verse in Yirmiyahu (3:3) in which the prophet condemns the people for having “the forehead of a harlot woman,” referring to their brazen, shameless misdeeds.) According to another view, the *tzitz* atones for blasphemy – a quality embodied by the Philistine general Golyat, who daily hurled insults at *Benei Yisrael* and their faith, and was then killed when he was struck by a stone in the forehead.

Rav Eliezer Horowitz of Tarnogrod, in his *Noam Megadim*, advances the theory that the *tzitz* might have also atoned for a different sin – the sin of insincere piety. The Torah speaks of the *tzitz* atoning for “*avon ha-kodashim*,” which could be read as referring to the “iniquity of the sacred actions.” The “sacred actions” which we perform could be “iniquitous” – if we perform them insincerely, with ulterior motives, just for show, for the sake of our reputation. And the *tzitz* thus atoned for these “sacred actions” which were, in truth, sinful.

What connection might there be, according to this theory, between the *tzitz* on the *kohen gadol*’s forehead and the sin of disingenuous piety?

The *tzitz*, essentially, served as a the *kohen gadol*’s “label,” precisely defining his role and identity. It stated that he was “*kodesh le-Hashem*” – consecrated for the service of the Almighty. The way we avoid insincerity and artificiality in our religious observance is by carrying with us at all times the “mission statement” of “*kodesh le-Hashem*,” that we are here to serve God. Of course, we are not expected to live at the standard of focused religious devotion to which the *kohen gadol* was held. Nevertheless, his designation as “*kodesh le-Hashem*,” as being entirely and exclusively devoted to serving God, represents the mindset with which we must all live – that we have been brought into this world to serve God. If we carry this “mission statement” of “*kodesh le-Hashem*” each day, then we our religious observance will be genuine, honest and sincere, truly aimed at fulfilling this lofty life mission, without any ulterior motives.

Monday

Parashat Tetzaveh begins with God’s command to *Benei Yisrael* that they supply pure olive oil for the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Mishkan*. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (5) draws a connection between this command and the first instance when the olive is mentioned in the Torah, commenting: “The Almighty said: Just as the dove brought light to the world, you, too, who are compared to a dove, bring olive oil and light the candle before Me.” After the flood, Noach waited for the floodwaters to subside, and eventually sent the dove to determine whether the world was again inhabitable. The dove found no dry land on which to stand, and so it returned to the ark. A week later, Noach again sent the dove, and this time, the dove returned with an olive branch, indicating that the earth had dried (8:11). God thus commanded *Benei Yisrael* – who are likened to a dove (“*Yonati be-chagvei ha-sela*” – Shir Hashirim 2:14) – to “bring light to the world” through the kindling of olive oil just as the dove “brought light to the world” by bringing Noach an olive branch after the flood.

How did the dove “bring light to the world” by returning to the ark with an olive branch? And how does this relate to the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*?

A number of writers suggested explaining the Midrash’s remark based on the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Eiruvin (18b) regarding the significance of the dove’s specific choice of an olive branch. The Gemara tells that the dove said to God, “Let my food be bitter like an olive, but entrusted into Your hands, and not be sweet like honey but dependent upon human beings.” The dove brought the branch of a tree which produces bitter fruit, the Gemara says, to indicate that it is preferable to eat “bitter” food given from God, rather than enjoy “sweet” food obtained through the largesse of other people. Rav Baruch Yitzchak Yissachar Leventhal, in his *Birkat Yitzchak* (Parashat Tetzaveh), explains the Gemara’s remark as teaching us the proper approach to faith in regard to our sustenance. The Gemara here instructs that it is preferable to live with faith even when our sustenance is less than ideal, than to live without faith when our sustenance is as “sweet” as we want it to be. The dove had been fed and cared for on the ark by Noach, and once it was freed, all it could find to eat was a “bitter” olive. The Gemara teaches that the dove’s condition after being freed was preferable to its condition on the ark – because we are always better off acknowledging God as the source of our livelihood than placing our trust in human beings, regardless of our condition.

Rav Leventhal explains on this basis the Midrash’s comment that *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to “bring light to the world” like the dove. The light of the *menorah* that illuminated the *Beit Ha-mikdash* symbolizes the light of faith in God that we are to shine upon the world through our religious devotion. This light is thus associated with the dove’s olive branch – which announced that it is preferable to live with faith in God’s beneficence, even when life seems “bitter,” than to place our trust in other people.

Rav Yitzchak Stollman, in his *Minchat Yitzchak* (Parashat Noach), explains differently. He writes that the dove’s announcement refers to the promise of change in the aftermath of the flood. God flooded the earth because of widespread greed and theft, as people felt entitled to take what belonged to others. The Gemara depicts the dove announcing after the flood that it wants only that which God gives it, without expecting to receive anything from others – expressing the new ethical mindset with which the world would be rebuilt. The message of the flood was that we need to feel content with what we rightfully earn, without feeling entitled to, or demanding, what others have. This message was the “light” brought by the dove in the aftermath of the flood, and this is the “light” that *Am Yisrael* is to bring to the world, symbolized by the light of the *menorah*. We are to illuminate the earth by maintaining a strict ethical code, by firmly believing that it is preferable to experience “bitterness” through moral conduct than to enjoy “sweetness” by taking for ourselves that which belongs to others. We are to serve as the models of this message represented by the dove, the message of compromising and sacrificing for the sake of fairness and integrity, rather than allowing the world to be overrun by greed, theft and corruption.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the comment of the Midrash (*Tanchuma*, Tetzaveh 5) drawing a connection between the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* with olive oil, and the dove sent by Noach from the ark after the flood. The Midrash teaches that God said to *Benei Yisrael*, “Just as the dove brought light to the world, you, too, who are compared to a dove, bring olive oil and light the candle before Me.” The dove “brought light to the world” when it showed Noach an olive branch, announcing that the floodwaters had subsided, and the world was again inhabitable. *Benei Yisrael* were thus instructed to “bring light to the world” by supplying olive oil – the symbol of the dove’s return to the ark – for the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Mikdash*.

How exactly did the dove “bring light to the world” by bringing an olive branch to Noach? And what connection is there between the dove’s olive branch and the light of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*?

By informing Noach and his family on the ark that the world was again viable for habitation, the dove in essence announced that God was still interested in the world’s habitation. Although He was compelled to destroy the earth because of the corruption of mankind, God nevertheless wanted to give them a second chance and allow them to rebuild the world. The “light” brought by the dove was the assurance that God was again inviting mankind into His world.

The *Beit Ha-mikdash* made a similar announcement – though an even more dramatic one: that God wishes to reside among us here in our world. If the dove brought the news that God wanted to renew human habitation on earth, the *Beit Ha-mikdash* brought the news that God wants to have His own “habitat,” as it were, here on earth, because He wishes to build a close relationship with His creatures. Indeed, the Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (22b) comments that the lights of the *menorah*, which included one candle that miraculously burned longer than the others, served as “testimony to the inhabitants of the world that the divine presence rests among Israel.” Just as it was uncertain whether God would renew the world after mankind’s failure that resulted in the flood, so was it uncertain after *Benei Yisrael*’s worship of the golden calf whether they would again be worthy of the divine presence. The “light” of the *menorah* represented God’s continued interest in residing among *Benei Yisrael* after the golden calf, just as dove’s olive branch signified God’s continued in interest in having people inhabit the world even after the generation of the flood.

We might also point to the fact that most of the sacrifices offered in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* served to atone for misdeeds. The light of the *menorah*, then, perhaps symbolizes the hope of rebirth and renewal. The notion of an atonement sacrifice, that God invites us to come before Him to seek forgiveness, serves as a profound source of “light” – of hope and optimism. Like the dove’s olive branch, it shows the world that God does not give up on us after we fail, that He still invites us into His world, and into His *Mikdash*, to try to improve. Just as the dove’s olive branch announced to the world the hope of mankind’s renewal, the *Beit Ha-mikdash* announced to the world the hope of personal renewal, that we are given the opportunity to rebuild ourselves after failure and reconnect with the Almighty.

Wednesday

The final section of Parashat Tetzaveh (30:1-10) tells of God’s command to construct the *mizbach ha-ketoret* – the incense altar, and to offer incense on this altar each morning and afternoon. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (Tetzaveh 15) comments that there is no offering more “beloved” (“*chaviv*”) to God than the *ketoret* (incense). All other offerings, the Midrash states, are offered “*le-tzorkheihen shel Yisrael*” – “for Israel’s needs.” The Midrash proceeds to explain that all the other sacrifices are brought for the purpose of atonement, either for specific sinful acts (in the case of a *chatat* or *asham*), or for improper thoughts or laxity in *mitzvot* (in the case of the voluntary sacrifices.) (The Midrash here takes the unconventional view that even the *shelamim*, which is commonly understood as a festive sacrifice, is brought for the purpose of atonement.) But the incense, by contrast, in the Midrash’s words, “*eina ba’al lo al ha-cheit…ela al ha-simcha*” – comes not on account of any kind of sin, but rather “for the sake of joy.” Later, the Midrash cites Rabbi Yitzchak ben Eliezer as expressing what seems to be a different opinion, stating that *Benei Yisrael* earned atonement through the incense offering. (See also *Keli Yakar*’s comments here in Parashat Tetzaveh, where he discusses at length the unique form of achievement achieved through the offering of *ketoret*.) According to the first view, however, the *ketoret* is especially beloved specifically because it serves not to atone for any wrongdoing, but rather as an expression of joy.

The Midrash here teaches that religious commitment must not revolve exclusively around the quest for atonement, the fear of retribution for sin and the desire to earn God’s forgiveness. While this is certainly one important aspect of religious life, this should not be the primary point of focus in our religious experience. Instead, religious life must be characterized by the *ketoret* – the fragrant incense, which represents an aura of joy, contentment and satisfaction. The offering other sacrifices, the majority of which were animals, involved the unseemly and malodorous process of slaughtering animals, skinning the carcasses, sprinkling the blood and placing portions of the animal on the sacrifices. In fact, the Rambam, in a famous and controversial passage in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:450, asserted that the purpose of the *ketoret* was to neutralize the foul odor created by the animal sacrifices. These sacrifices – symbolizing the process of confession and seeking atonement – are critical in religious life, but they are far less pleasant and “fragrant” that the *ketoret*, the aura of joy and serenity that ought to characterize our service of God. Religious life requires both the “atonement sacrifices” as well as the “*ketoret*,” but the latter is the most “cherished” by God. Certainly, we must go through the uncomfortable, unpleasant process of humbly acknowledging our mistakes and seeking atonement through *teshuva*. Our primary obligation, however, is to produce the fragrant scent of the “*ketoret*,” to live a life of joyful, enthusiastic devotion to God. If we focus in religious life only, or primarily, on “atonement,” on the mistakes we’ve made, then our religious lives become dark and dreary. We must focus instead on the “incense,” on the beauty and joy of Torah and *mitzvot*, the involvement in which should bring us genuine happiness and fulfillment.

Thursday

*Megilat Ester* tells that when Ester – who was unaware of Haman’s edict to annihilate the Jews – heard that Mordekhai was in the public square wearing sackcloth and weeping, she summoned one of her servants – Hatakh – to go to Mordekhai (4:5). Hatakh then became the messenger through whom Mordekhai and Ester communicated, as Mordekhai implored Ester to petition the king on the Jews’ behalf.

The Gemara in Masekhet Megila (15a) surprisingly identifies Hatakh as Daniel, the Jew who had served as a distinguished royal advisor to the Babylonian kings, and then to the Persian kings after Persia seized control over the region. According to one opinion cited by the Gemara, Daniel is referred to by the name “Hatakh” because “*chatekhuhu mi-gedulato*” – “they ‘sliced’ him from his position of greatness.” Rashi explains that Daniel held a prestigious position in the royal courts of the Babylonian king Belshatzar, and then of the Persian kings Cyrus and Darius, but under Achashveirosh’s rule, he was demoted, and became just an ordinary servant of the queen. According to the second opinion, to the contrary, Daniel was given the name “Hatakh” because “*kol divrei malkhut nechetakhin al piv*” – “all royal matters were decided by his word.” Daniel remained a well-respected royal advisor even under Achashveirosh, to the point where his decisions on all matters were considered authoritative.

Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohein of Dvinsk, in his *Meshekh Chokhma*, suggests a much different reading of the first opinion presented by the Gemara. Perhaps uncomfortable with two *Amoraim* offering diametrically opposed perspectives on Daniel’s stature, *Meshekh Chokhma* explains that both views actually agree that Daniel held a prestigious position even during Achashveirosh’s reign. However, *Meshekh Chokhma* writes, the first view maintained that Daniel’s stature in the eyes of the Jews of his time was lowered during the events of the Purim story. Daniel was revered for his unwavering faith in God, as he continued his practice of praying to God three times each day even when this was banned by the Persian government at the threat of death, an offense for which he was cast to a lions’ den. From that time on, Daniel was a legend and an iconic spiritual figure. Now, however, in response to Haman’s edict, all the Jews exhibited great faith and self-sacrifice. Haman’s explanation for why the Jews should be annihilated was that they followed different customs than the rest of the empire (“*dateihem shonot mi-kol am*” – 3:9). The Jews’ natural, instinctive reaction would have been to adjust their behavior accordingly, to assimilate more fully than they already had within Persian society, in their attempt to escape Haman’s edict. But instead, they turned to God, fasting and assembling for prayer, strengthening – rather than abandoning – their religious commitment. Through this process, *Meshekh Chokhma* boldly suggests, the Jews discovered within themselves a degree of greatness that narrowed the gap, so-to-speak, between them and legends such as Daniel. According to *Meshekh Chokhma*, this is the meaning of “*chatekhuhu mi-gedulato*” – the Jews’ awe of Daniel was diminished, as they awakened within themselves a level of devotion and sacrifice which resembled that which had been displayed by Daniel.

*Meshekh Chokhma*’s comments touch upon one of the important themes of the Purim story and the Purim celebration – newfound appreciation of our positive qualities and our achievements. Although the Jews in Persia continued some Jewish practices, as Haman noted to Achashveirosh, they nevertheless had assimilated into Persian society, as indicated by the Gemara’s famous remark that the Jews of Shushan participated in Achashveirosh’s feast (Megila 12a). The Gemara further states (12a), perhaps metaphorically, that Achashveirosh at this feast wore the garments of the *kohen gadol* and used the utensils that had been used in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – teaching that the Jews had substituted in their minds the solemn service of the Temple with the decadent feasts of Shushan. They were submerged in the vanity, overindulgence and depravity of Persian society, and thus naturally felt very distant from God. Their response to Haman’s edict aroused within them a spiritual spark which they did not know existed, a connection to God of which they had been unaware. And thus they saw themselves as less different and distant from Daniel’s stature than they had previously thought.

Much has been said about the enigmatic Kabbalistic tradition (originating in the *Tikunei Zohar*) linking Purim and Yom Kippur, two occasions which we observe in diametrically opposite ways. These two days are, in several respects, mirror images of one another. On Yom Kippur, we reflect on our failings, focusing on what we have done wrong and what more we could have done right, taking note of how far we are from the people we are capable of becoming and expected to become. This is a painful, agonizing process, and thus we fast, deny ourselves physical enjoyment, repeatedly confess our sins, and somberly commit to try to improve. On Purim, we do just the opposite – instead of agonizing over who we are not, we celebrate who we are. We drink to the point of (mild) inebriation, clouding our judgment and our decision-making faculties, such that we reveal our innermost characters, discovering the beauty of the essence of our beings. Whereas we spend Yom Kippur thinking of how we can and must be better, we spend Purim focusing on how good we already are, celebrating the fact that even when we take away our rational abilities, our inner core is beautiful and firmly committed to God.

On Yom Kippur, we are tormented by the contrast between us and “Daniel,” the outstanding person that we are capable of being, as we think long and hard of all the mistakes we have made and all the flaws in our conduct and characters. On Purim, without deluding ourselves into equating ourselves with “Daniel,” we celebrate the fact that we are not as different from “Daniel” as we might have thought. We focus on all the good we have done and regularly do, on all the achievements in which we can legitimately take pride, on all that is right and precious about our conduct and our characters. While on every other day we work and struggle to improve and grow, on Purim we experience the incomparable joy of genuine pride and satisfaction, directing our attention to all that is good about us and about our special nation, thereby developing the excitement, enthusiasm and inspiration we need to continue and reach even higher.

Friday

One of the amusing accounts presented by the Gemara regarding the Purim story involves Haman’s daughter, who did not recognize Haman as he led Mordekhai through the streets of Shushan. As we read in *Megilat Ester*, at the time when Haman came to the king’s palace to request that his nemesis, Mordekhai, be killed, the king ordered him to give Mordekhai great honor – to dress him in royal garb, have him ride on the royal horse, and lead through the main thoroughfare shouting that this is how those loyal to the king are rewarded. The Gemara relates that as Haman led Mordekhai on the king’s horse and passed near his own home, Haman’s daughter was on the rooftop and saw the spectacle. Apparently too distant to get a good look, she assumed that her father – the Persian vizier, to whom the king had ordered the entire kingdom to show honor – was the man on the horse, and his despised foe, Mordekhai, was the man leading the horse through the city. Eager to add to Mordekhai’s humiliation, she took the basin used as the family’s toilet and threw its contents onto the man she had wrongly identified as Mordekhai – which was, in fact, her father. Upon realizing her mistake, the Gemara concludes, Haman’s daughter took her own life by jumping from the roof.

What might the deeper message of this unusual account of Haman being misidentified by his daughter? Is this told simply to underscore the extent of Haman’s downfall, or is there perhaps a more profound meaning to this bizarre incident?

Already Ben Ish Chai, in his *Ben Yehoyada*, raises the question of how Haman’s daughter could not have recognized him by his appearance or by his voice. The simple answer, seemingly, is that she was too far away to see or hear her father. But on a deeper level, perhaps, this might be precisely the Gemara’s point – that Haman’s persona was defined entirely by his position of honor and prestige. Haman had no other personal identity besides his powerful post. The amusing story told by the Gemara is actually a tragic depiction of a person who could not be recognized by even his own family when he was not being showered with honor. This showering became Haman’s very identity, such that he was assumed to be somebody else when the roles were reversed.

This aspect of Haman’s character can be seen through his and Mordekhai’s drastically different reactions to this incident. The *Megila* relates (6:12) that after Haman paraded Mordekhai through Shushan, Mordekhai returned to his place by the gate to the palace. He was entirely unaffected by this incident. He did not revel in his having been honored or in his Haman’s being disgraced; his personality and sense of self were unchanged by having his archenemy forced to show him great respect. Haman, on the other hand, returned home in a state of anguish and grief, furious over what he had just gone through. As his entire self-identity was anchored in his position of prestige, he lost his composure the moment he suffered indignity.

The Gemara’s story, then, instructs that we must never identify ourselves based on our successes or our failures. Our identity and our sense of self-worth must never be dependent on any given achievement, position, role, or condition. We are defined neither by our impressive accomplishments nor by our embarrassing mistakes. And thus we should not be excessively jubilant over the former or excessively disturbed by the latter – because neither determines our true essence. We should be readily identifiable and recognizable to all who know us – including ourselves – whether we succeed or fail, both when we enjoy triumph and when we suffer defeat, and never define ourselves by one or the other.

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