**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT TZAV – PURIM**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (139b) raises the question of where we might find an allusion to Haman in the Chumash, and it answers by citing a verse from Parashat Bereishit (3:11). After Adam and Chava ate from the forbidden tree, God spoke to Adam and asked, “*Ha-min ha-etz asher tzivitikha le-vilti akhol mimenu akhalta*” – “Have you eaten from the tree from which I had commanded you not to eat?” The word “*ha-min*” can be read as “Haman,” and this verse thus presents a veiled allusion to the future nemesis of the Jews in Persia.

How might we understand the connection implied by the Gemara between Haman and Adam and Chava’s sin?

Rav Aharon Kotler (as cited and explained by [Rav Ron Yitzchok Eisenman](http://ahavasisrael.org/torah/the_short_vort/4319/)) answered that the Gemara refers here to one particular flaw in Haman’s character, the flaw which led him to his downfall. In one of the most comical yet poignant series of verses in the *Megilla* (5:11-13), we read how Haman gloated to his family about the wealth and prestige he enjoyed as the highest ranking official in the kingdom besides Achashverosh, and then lamented, “But all this is worth nothing to me, whenever I see Mordekhai, the Jew…” Haman achieved what most people spend their lives aspiring to – wealth and honor. He lived the kind of life that most others dream about, enjoying all the wealth and luxury imaginable, as well as near absolute power and authority. And yet, he was dissatisfied: “*Ve-khol zeh einenu shoveh li*…” Everything he had was worth nothing because of the one person who refused to bow to him. Haman was incapable of enjoying what he had because of the tiny bit of honor he could not have.

The Gemara is teaching us that while we might marvel or laugh at Haman’s dissatisfaction with his life, in truth, it expresses a tendency ingrained within human nature since the time of the very first human being. Adam and Chava, not unlike Haman, had just about anything they could have wanted. They enjoyed an idyllic existence in *Gan Eden*, with everything ready and available – except for one tree whose fruit was declared off-limits. Unable to cope with this sole restriction on what was otherwise a life of unbridled blessing, they felt dissatisfied and insisted on taking the forbidden fruit.

The Gemara is alerting us to the fact that even in *Gan Eden*, and even when a person rises to the greatest heights of prestige and power, there will always be a “tree” we cannot have. Life and human nature are such that we never feel entirely satisfied. There is always something we want but cannot have. People tend to point to something they want and assume that once it is achieved, they will experience joy and contentment. But the stories of Adam and Chava and of Haman remind us that no matter what we have, we will always want more.

The solution is to focus on the blessings in our lives and to remind ourselves that we can feel content and fulfilled even if many dreams and desires remain unfulfilled. Haman could not enjoy his blessings because of his one source of frustration. We must strive to find contentment with what we have notwithstanding our quest for that we still lack. In this way, we can experience “*Gan Eden*” even in our very imperfect world, recognizing that there are far more “trees” which we are able to enjoy than those which remain unattainable.

Sunday

The *Megilla* (chapter 2) describes the procedure that was followed when young women were brought to Achashverosh so he could choose a queen. We read that on the day each young woman went for her turn with the king, she was given anything she wanted to bring with her (2:13). Ester was unique in this regard, in that she did not ask for anything, and brought with her only that which had been given to her by Hegai, the servant assigned over the women. The question arises as to the significance of this detail and how it contributes to the story of Ester’s ultimate selection as queen.

Malbim explains that the *Megilla* here seeks to emphasize that Ester did not want to be chosen, and everything that she did took place against her will. The reason why the women were allowed to request gifts, Malbim claims, was to make it clear that they slept with the king willingly, that they were giving themselves to him in exchange for the lavish goods he granted them. Ester, however, did everything she could to make it clear that she underwent this process out of coercion, and had no desire at all to be with the king. To that end, she did not ask for anything, sending the message that she wanted no part of this arrangement. The verse concludes, “Ester earned the favor of all who saw her” to say that despite her begrudging attitude, her attractive appearance earned her everyone’s affection.

Rav Moshe Amiel ([*Derashot El Ami*, vol. 3, p. 163](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=31851&st=&pgnum=163)) explained differently. Rather than viewing Ester’s decision not to request gifts as a strategic tactic, Rav Amiel suggests that this reflected a noble character trait. Namely, she was not demanding or finicky. She was content with what she was given and neither expected or wanted more. Whereas the other women jumped at the opportunity to obtain elaborate gifts from the palace, Ester had no interest in such gifts. Rav Amiel suggests that the *Megilla* emphasized this point to show that the Jews’ salvation resulted from this quality. The verse concludes by telling us of how Ester found favor in everyone’s eyes because this occurred specifically as a result of her refined character. Her noble spirit impressed the people in the palace and ultimately led to her being chosen queen, which in turn led to her rescuing the Jewish Nation.

Ester’s example teaches us the importance of proper prioritization and avoiding preoccupation with vanity. She shows us that just because we are able to have something does not mean that we should take it, and just because everybody else around us has something does not mean that we need it. If we keep our priorities in order and maintain a keen sense of what is important and what isn’t, we will be able to draw the vital distinction between needs and wants, and to live contently without constantly pursuing additional comforts and luxuries or fussing over trivialities that are not really worth our time or attention.

Monday

In the “*Asher Heini*” hymn customarily recited on Purim after the *Megilla* reading, we describe Ester’s emergence as the Jews’ savior with the words, “*Neitz parach mi-lulav hein Hadassah*” – “A shoot sprouted from a palm – this is Hadassah.” The author here appears to associate Ester, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah, with the *hadas* (myrtle) included in the *arba minim* which we hold on Sukkos. Ester is described here as the “*hadas*” that emerged from the “*lulav*,” likely referring to not just the *lulav*, but to the four species, which are often referred to by the largest, the *lulav*.

This description of Ester and the reference to the four species bring to mind the famous comment in the Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni*, Parashat Emor) viewing the four species as symbolic of four different types of Jews. The *arba minim* are held together to symbolize the unity and sense mutual responsibility to which we should aspire. In this vein, Rav Yitzchak Meir Schwartz explains in his [*Imrei Yitzchak*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=38340&st=&pgnum=20) the phrase, “*Neitz parach mi-lulav*.”The description of Ester as having “sprouted” from the “*lulav*” to rescue the nation perhaps refers to Ester’s role in bringing the nation together in unity, as symbolized by the four species. Many writers have noted that Ester’s command to Mordekhai, “*Leikh kenos et kol ha-Yehudim*” – “Go, assemble all the Jews” (Ester 4:16) – indicates not merely the physical assembly of Jews for prayer, but also a process of reconciliation of restoration of harmony and fraternity. .Haman described the Jews to Achashverosh as a “scattered and disjointed nation” (3:8), and Ester sought to respond to his edict by triggering a process of “assembly,” of bringing the Jews together, elevating them above their differences and petty arguments, and creating a sense of unity and harmony among the nation. And thus Ester is associated with the four species, which are held together as a symbol of different groups and kinds of Jews joining together in a single, indivisible bond of love and concern.

The concept of unity and togetherness marks one of the numerous themes shared by the otherwise opposite celebrations of Purim and Yom Kippur, holidays which Kabbalistic teaching famously associates with one another. The Purim celebration, to a large extent, revolves around the theme of Jewish fraternity, as we are obliged to exchange gifts and support the poor, the *Megilla* reading should preferably be conducted in large assemblies, and the Purim feast is customarily held with large gatherings of relatives and friends. On Yom Kippur, *Halakha* requires seeking and granting forgiveness, a requirement which many view as intended not merely to facilitate atonement for interpersonal offenses, but also as an integral part of the day’s observance. On both these occasions, we look beyond the differences that appear to set us apart from one another, and see each other as fellow Jews who, ultimately, have much in common. On Yom Kippur, as we introspect and reflect upon our unworthiness, we realize that we are all flawed, that none of us have the right to claim any sort of superiority over our fellow Jews, and that we all live at every moment in a state of absolute dependence on the Almighty’s compassion. Upon considering our inadequacies and failures, we recognize just how audacious it is to harm or offend our fellow Jews, and how we have no right to bear grudges against them, as we are all, ultimately, flawed and collectively dependent on God’s grace for our very existence. And on Purim, we recognize that we all share the same fate, that Haman’s hatred of Mordekhai automatically translates into hatred for the entire Jewish Nation. The entire nation rallied behind the *kohen gadol* approaching God on Yom Kippur to beg for their continued survival, and the entire nation rallied behind Ester as she approached Achashverosh to beg for their continued survival. The gravity and consequences of both occasions made our differences and quarrels seem trivial and meaningless, and thus inspired a sense of unity, which is reflected in the observance of these two occasions.

While we might at times appear as an “*am echad mefuzar u-meforad*,” a disjointed group of different factions, the truth, as the Jews revealed at the time of the Purim story, is that we are a single, indivisible entity. This recognition allows us to transcend our differences and find that common essence that we all share, leading us to the special joy of Purim and the strengthening of the bonds of love that tie us all together.

Tuesday

We read in the *Megilla* (2:11) that after Ester was taken to Achashverosh’s palace as part of the search for a new queen, Mordekhai would go each day outside the area where the women were being held in order to inquire into Ester’s wellbeing. The Midrash (*Ester Rabba* 6) comments that the seeds of Mordekhai’s future position of leadership were sown at that point, when he showed his concern for Ester after she had been taken to the palace: “The Almighty said to him: You looked after the wellbeing of a single soul; by your life, you will ultimately look after the wellbeing of an entire nation.” The Midrash notes that in the final verse of the *Megilla*, which tells of Mordekhai’s prominent position and his esteem in the Jews’ eyes, he is described as “*doresh tov le-amo*” – “seeking the wellbeing of his nation.” This privilege of caring for the needs of the entire Jewish nation, the Midrash claims, came in reward for his caring for the needs of his orphaned cousin.

*Chazal* here convey an important lesson regarding leadership, noting that a leader is one who shows concern for individuals, specifically, for the lowly, desperate souls whom people generally tend to ignore. From *Chazal*’s perspective, leadership skills begin not with a grand vision, but rather with simple, genuine sensitivity and kindness to the vulnerable and the underprivileged. Just as Moshe became leader after he displayed concern for people who suffered persecution and bullying (the Israelite slaves, and Yitro’s daughters), similarly, Mordekhai assumed a leadership role due to the kindness and generosity he extended to a poor orphan girl.

Additionally, however, *Chazal* here draw our attention to the importance and significance of the seemingly small, trivial act of “*derishat shalom*” – inquiring into a person’s wellbeing. Before Ester was taken to Achashverosh, Mordekhai had adopted her, caring for her and tending to her needs as a parent. In fact, the *Megilla* uses in this context the word “*omen*” (2:7), which is generally used to describe a nurse. Mordekhai was not only a father to Ester; he acted as her mother, tenderly caring for her as a nurse cares for an infant. And yet, despite all that Mordekhai had already done for Ester, *Chazal* afford special significance to the seemingly simple measure of arriving each day to check up on her. The Midrash draws our attention to the fact that beyond providing much-needed assistance to the needy, *chesed* also includes simple things such as paying a visit (or, in modern times, a phone call) and inquiring into a person’s wellbeing.

Significantly, Mordekhai is said to have been rewarded for having inquired into the wellbeing of “*nefesh achat*” – “a single soul.” It made no difference to the Midrash that this “single soul” was that of Ester, who ultimately became queen and saved the Jewish People. What was important is that he concerned himself with the needs of another person, and for this he was rewarded. The needs of every individual should be important to us, regardless of how simple and unremarkable as he or she may seem. In the eyes of *Chazal*, even a simple inquiry into the wellbeing of a seemingly simple person is a significant act of kindness, rendering one worthy of rising to the stature of a “*doresh tov le-amo*.”

Wednesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (139b) raises the question of where in the Torah an allusion can be found to Mordekhai, and it replies by noting one of the ingredients of the *shemen ha-mishcha* – the anointing oil used to formally consecrate the *Mishkan*, its appurtenances, and the *kohanim*. This ingredient is *mor deror* (a type of myrrh – Shemot 30:23), and *Targum Onelos* translates this term as *mira dakhya*, which sounds like the name “Mordekhai.” It is thus in this context that the Torah alludes to Mordekhai.

How might we explain the connection implied by the Gemara between the Purim miracle and the *shemen ha-mishcha*?

One possibility, perhaps, relates to the theme of designation and special status. The *shemen ha-mishcha*’s entire purpose was to set a group of people and objects apart from all others, formally assigning them a unique status and elevating them to a higher plane. The Jews at the time of the Purim story were assimilated into Persian society and appeared to be neither different nor distinct from the others in the kingdom. The Purim miracle reminded them of their distinctiveness, that despite their apparent assimilation, they were singled out by Haman for annihilation, and by God for special protection. The idea of the *shemen ha-mishcha* is, indeed, one of the central themes of Purim – that even when it appears that we are no different from other nations, our special bond with the Almighty is eternal and unshakable, and our designation as His treasured nation will remain intact forever. We might add that the *Sifrei* (Parashas Naso), cited by the Rambam in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*asei* 35), establishes that the initial anointing of the *Mishkan* and its appurtenances in the time of Moshe sufficed for all future vessels of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Symbolically, then, the *shemen ha-mishcha* may perhaps be viewed as a model of the eternal “consecration” of *Benei Yisrael*, which endures even in our state of exile as we eagerly await the restoration of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

After the *Megilla* reading, we customarily recite the “*Shoshanat Yaakov*” hymn, which describes the Jews of Shushan as “the rose of Yaakov” exhilarating as Mordekhai left the king’s palace dressed in regal attire. On one level, this phrase hearkens to the verse in the *Megilla* (8:15) which speaks of the joy in Shushan (“*tzahala ve-sameicha*”) after Mordekhai’s departure from the palace, and thus “*Shoshanat Yaakov*” is simply a poetic reference to the Jewish of Shushan (*Shushan/Shoshana*). Additionally, however, the image of the rose connotes something especially beautiful that stands out from the rest, as in the famous verse in Shir Hashirim (2:2), “As a rose among thorns – so is my beloved among the girls.” The astonishing turn of events in Shushan reminded the Jews of the time of their status of distinction, that they were a “*shoshana bein ha-chochim*,” locked in an eternal, unbreakable bond with God. This was the cause of their outburst of joy – “*tzahala ve-sameicha*” – as they reflected upon their eternal designation as God’s *am segula*, that their initial “anointing” had not expired, and continues making our nation special and unique forever.

Thursday

The Gemara in Maseches Megilla (7b) establishes the famous *halakha* that “a person is obligated to become inebriated on Purim until he does not know the difference between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai’.” While this is the prevalent and generally accepted translation of the Gemara’s remark, the *Nimukei Yosef* offers a different interpretation, translating the word “*li-bsumei*” not as intoxication, but rather as merriment and levity. In his view, the Gemara here establishes a halakhic requirement to, in his words, “to speak words of humor until people think one does not know the difference between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai’.” According to the *Nimukei Yosef*, then, we are required not to become inebriated, but rather to engage in humor and frivolity.

We might ask why the Gemara would introduce this requirement in such a fashion, stating that we must act in a way that makes us seem incapable of distinguishing between Haman’s evil and Mordekhai’s piety. Why is this the yardstick that determines the required extent of our merriment on Purim?

It might be suggested that the *Nimukei Yosef*’s understanding of the Gemara forms a basis for the widespread – and surprising – custom to lower our standards of reverence on Purim. One day a year, we permit congregants and students to jokingly imitate their rabbis, and many scholars deliver silly Torah discourses, as though making light of our sacred Torah. Even synagogues and study halls are occasionally scenes of merriment, with humorous signs and jokes posted on the walls. Possibly, this practice is rooted in the *Nimukei Yosef*’s understanding of the obligation to make jokes on Purim in a manner that blurs the distinction “between ‘cursed is Haman’ and ‘blessed is Mordekhai’.” We engage in hearty, good-natured humor even about serious religious matters and distinguished rabbinic figures to fulfill this obligation to appear as though we do not recognize their unique stature of importance. (Of course, caution must be taken to ensure that this is done in good taste and does not result in the profaning of Torah.)

If so, then we need to address the question of why this is acceptable, let alone encouraged. What purpose can possibly be served by lowering our standards – if only slightly – of reverence and esteem for matters of *kedusha* and Torah figures?

Rashi, in his commentary to Parashat Ki-Teitzei (Devarim 25:18), cites the Midrash which describes how Amalek set out to attack to *Benei Yisrael* for the specific purpose of demonstrating their vulnerability. After the spectacular events of the Exodus and the splitting of the sea, *Benei Yisrael* were feared and held in high esteem among the nations of the world. Amalek rejected the notion that *Benei Yisrael* was somehow special, and set out to prove its point by exposing their vulnerability through a surprise military attack. As many writers have noted, Amalek is associated with cynicism and negativity, with denying the significance and positive attributes of people and things. For Amalek, nothing is important, meaningful or worthy of admiration. This tradition was carried through Haman, a scion of Amalek, who viewed the Jews with disdain and felt they were expendable as part of his pursuit of his megalomaniacal ambitions.

On Purim, we turn the tables on Amalek, so-to-speak, by outwardly embracing a small element of its cynical attitude. We give the appearance of mocking and making light of that which we hold most dear, of following Amalek’s example of contempt for anything which claims to have meaning and deep significance. We demonstrate that just as Haman could not defeat us, Amalek’s negativity is likewise powerless against the eternal Jewish spirit. By putting Amalek’s cynicism on full display, we make the resounding statement that it has no effect, that we are passionately committed to Torah and *mitzvot* even when we incorporate a bit of Amalek into our outlook and conduct.

Ironically, then, our humorous jabbing on Purim actually serves to highlight our unbreakable religious commitment, as we announce that even the caustic cynicism of Amalek cannot extinguish our passion for the study and observance of the Torah, which we treasure, cherish and hold to be sacred for all eternity.

(Based on a *drasha* by Rabbi Dov Loketch)

Friday

Towards the beginning of Parashat Tzav, the Torah discusses the basic laws concerning the *mincha* offering, which consisted of flour mixed with oil. The Torah forbids leavening the *mincha* – “*lo tei’afeh chametz*” (6:10) – and this prohibition applies both to the handful that was placed on the altar, and to the portion eaten by the *kohanim* (Rashi, citing *Torat Kohanim*). The exception to this rule is the *korban shetei ha-lachem*, the special sacrifice offered on Shavuot, which included two leavened loaves of bread, as the Torah requires later in Sefer Vayikra, in Parashat Emor (23:17).

The Munkatcher Rav, in [*Minchat Elazar* (5:31)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14916&st=&pgnum=34), asserts that when a *kohen* receives both a portion of the *shetei ha-lechem* and a portion of an ordinary *mincha*, he must eat them separately. If he eats the two portions together, a piece of the ordinary *mincha* may absorb *chametz* in his mouth from the piece of the *shetei ha-lechem*, and he would thus be in violation of the law forbidding turning the *mincha* into *chametz*.

On this basis, the Munkatcher Rav explains the Mishna’s comment in Masekhet Sukka (55b) concerning the case when Shavuot falls on Shabbat. Every Shabbat, the *lechem ha-panim* – the “showbread” on the table in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* – was distributed among the *kohanim* on duty in the *Mikdash*. And thus when Shavuot fell on Shabbat, the *kohanim* that day received both a portion of the *lechem ha-panim*, which was unleavened, and a portion of the leavened *shetei ha-lechem*. The Mishna states that when these portions were distributed, the *kohen* was told, “*Heilakh matza, heilakh chametz*” – “Here is *matza*, here is *chametz*.” Meaning, the *kohanim* was notified that one piece was unleavened, originating from the *lechem ha-panim*, and the other was *chametz*, as it was a portion of the *shetei ha-lechem*. Rashi comments that this notification was given due to the *halakha* that every sacrifice is distributed equally among the *kohanim*, and *kohanim* are not given a larger share of one and then none in another. The *kohen* was thus informed that he was receiving a portion from each sacrifice as he rightfully deserves. The Munkatcher Rav questions Rashi’s explanation, and argues that a more compelling reason for this procedure is that it serves to warn the *kohanim* to eat these portions separately. In light of the Torah prohibition against leavening the *mincha*, it was forbidden for *kohanim* to eat their portion of a *mincha* – including the *lechem ha-panim* – together with *chametz*, and thus they were notified when they received both *chametz* and unleavened portions of their respective statuses.

The Munkatcher Rav proceeds to note that the Rambam makes no mention of the Mishna’s comment that *kohanim* are told, “*Heilakh matza, heilakh chametz*.” (This omission was noted by the *Mishneh Le-melekh* in Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash 4:5.) The reason, he suggests, is that this procedure was simply a function of the prohibition against leavening the *mincha*, which the Rambam codifies explicitly in Hilkhot Ma’aseh Ha-korbanot (12:14). As such, the Rambam did not deem it necessary to mention that the *kohanim* should be warned to eat the two portions separately.